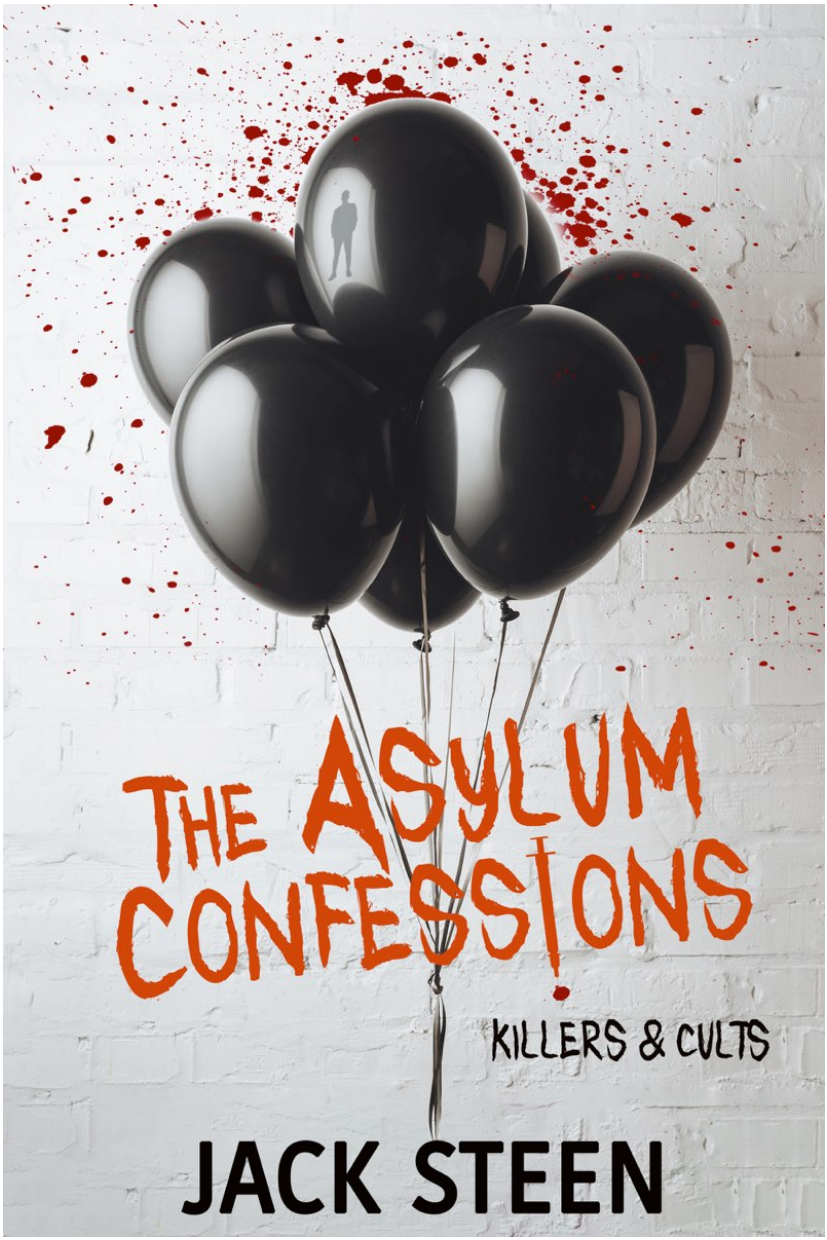
THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS
KILLERS & CULTS
JACK STEEN

# THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS

KILLERS & CULTS

JACK STEEN

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# WHO AM I?

My name is Jack Steen.

That name shouldn't mean anything to you. But it does to others, and that's what counts.

I'm a nobody, really.

I'm not a writer. I'm not a storyteller. I'm not a goddamn thing.

I'm just a man who wipes the asses of those society couldn't give two shits about. I give them their medicine, change their diapers, and provide something no one else has...

An audience.

I work as a night nurse in the Asylum.

Which one? Doesn't matter - they're all the same. After you read the stories, you should be able to figure it out, but apparently, I might get sued if I actually say the name, so I won't.

You picked up this book because of the title, right? Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane. That's exactly what you're about to read.

That's what I do. I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard. The ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

Here's a reminder: I won't tell you which Asylum I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus on one central theme.

This book - it's about the weird stuff. It's entered around Halloween and cults.

I've got a patient raised in a cult (or so he claims). There's a mother who gave birth to the Anti-Christ. I'm going to introduce you to the real-life Candyman (and he's nothing like the movie, so get that out of your head). I've got the confession of a survivalist who got embroiled in a cult where the leader literally ate people. I'm even throwing in a short confession - the patient died before he could tell us everything, but once you start reading, you'll understand why he's included.

I can't say all the stories are one hundred percent true. Some I believe. Some I don't. That shouldn't be surprising, I mean - look at who is telling the confession! Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic, and like the sound of their voice. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice. But, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

# NOTE TO READERS

Welcome to your newest addiction!

The Asylum Confessions is slowly becoming available on all retailers so get ready! The books area all available in print with more ebooks and audio as they come.

If you want to read the whole series - head over to my website to grab the whole series, or shop at your favorite retailer.

These books might be a little different than you're used to reading, so let me prepare you: you are reading the deathbed confessions of my patients (serial killers, cannibals, rapists, murders etc). I am not a writer. I've never taken a writing class in my life. I don't try to fix any of the confessions you read - what you read is what I heard. I try to make sure there are no spelling errors, but if you're looking for a book written by the next Stephen King, this ain't it.

Although, if you're Stephen King, or know him and want to recommend these books to him…go for it!

Now that's out of the way - I've got to get this off my chest.

When I first put out the confessions, I never thought anyone would be interested in them!

If you figured out who I am and where I work, then you'll know where the bar I head to after every shift. Come join me for a beer. I might have more stories to tell.

See you then.

PS…if you want more confessions and can't wait for the next book to be released, then I suggest you join my newsletter or my VIP

ADDICTS Subscription group - links are on my website:
www.jacksteenbooks.com

# THANK YOU

Special thank you's to the following people in my VIP SUBSCRIPTION group:

Ashley Malchow, Jennifer Reesor ,
Rachel Playforth, Alyssa McCloud,
Kimerly E Stuckey, Terry Schott,
Samantha Loy, Jen Brooks
Jami Barney, Sara Farlee,
Heather Poll, Lauren Kinser
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Jes Kress, Leese Wright
Dawn Watson, Kristal Stroh,
Andrea Murray, Vicky Whiteside
Sarah Bouchard, Bonnie Cibura,
Christian Dowler, Dawn Cain
and Tiffani Wilson

These confessions are dedicated to you!

# A WORD OF WARNING

You're about to read very different confessions then you may be expecting.

Here's how the confessions go…once they're ready, I write down everything they say: their story and what they say to me, and such.

Whether what they tell me is the honest truth, I'll leave that up to you to decide.

What are these confessions about? Well…I've got a grieving mother, a man born in a cult, another trapped in a cult, one who has a special love for Halloween, and a man with the nickname of The Candyman.

Do I believe them all. Nope. Not for a minute. But some, yes. Which ones…now, that's an interesting question.

There will be more confessions coming so if you like what you read, join my newsletter and grab a free confession while you're at it.

Anytime I have a new book out, I'll send the newsletter, so you'll get 3-4 emails a year from me. Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com

Or, if you want to become an Asylum Addict, join my VIP ADDICTS SUBSCRIPTION GROUP, where you'll get to read whatever I write for free and before anyone else and even get some free stuff. https://reamstories.com/jacksteen

Thanks for reading…

Jack

# ALYSSA

PATIENT 983

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS
OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

# CHAPTER ONE

There's not much that churns my stomach.

Well, there are a few things, but considering all I've seen while working here at The Asylum, all in all, there's not much that bothers me.

However, there are some patients that not just churn my stomach, but their story kicks right in the gut and doesn't stop until you're down for the count.

Bucket was one of those patients. You remember her confession, right?

That girl, her story pulled at every single heartstring, twisted them, and tied them in knots that will never come undone.

This next patient I'm introducing you to, she's not like Bucket, but she's close.

Close as in: her story is fucked up big time, and I'm not sure if she can be blamed for her actions.

Although, why she did what she did, I can’t wrap my head around that. I don’t think you will be able to either.

A few days ago, I got the heads up that she may be joining us sooner or later, so I had Buckets old room readied for her. I even brought in one of Mom's knitted throws and left it on the bed for her.

Alyssa is the sweetest thing, and her blue eyes just suck you in, much like those summer days when you lay out on the grass and gaze up to the sky, you know?

I'll admit, it's been a while since I've laid out on the grass in the middle of a sweltering summer, but I do remember those days. I

remember taking advantage of my days off, of what it was like to sweat my ass off, to wake up to a blistering burn because I'd been stupid enough to start day drinking the minute I opened my eyes. I remember sitting in a hunting blind or fishing off the bank of a river...I miss those days. I miss that youth. I miss the kid I used to be.

I wonder if Alyssa ever thinks about her youth? If she misses who she used to be, or if she's blocked all of that out? I'm hoping I'll have the opportunity to ask her and that she will tell me the truth, not just what I want to hear.

People say the eyes are windows to our souls. For me, you staring into my eyes will only reveal an empty box full of nothingness, as Ike likes to say, but when it comes to Alyssa, it's like looking into a kaleidoscope.

You can't trust Alyssa's eyes.

# CHAPTER TWO

The photo in Alyssa's file holds no resemblance to the woman lying in the hospital bed.

She used to have that innocent girl-next-door vibe, with straight brown hair that hung over her shoulders, sweet smile that promised long walks on the beach or homemade picnic dates beneath a willow tree.

The woman I'm staring at has braided grey hair and wrinkle lines outlining a resting frown that's taken its permanent place on her face.

Her eyes are closed, but I already know they're going to be cloudy when she opens them due to cataracts.

I leave her to sleep and head to my desk where I've got a mountain pile of paperwork to get through - as usual.

I haven't seen much of Ike this shift. He was called downstairs to help with patient intake, and I don't expect to see him for a while. We'll end our shift down at the bar where he can fill me in on all the details of the new patients that came in today.

My floor is humming, which is unexpected. It's the first night this week it's been like this, and I can only think it's the full moon that's the cause.

Yes, I believe moon phases affect us on a subconscious level. You would too, if you worked here as long as I have.

There's a low vibration that settles in your ankles as you walk the floors. In some places, you can feel it in the palms of your hands; in others, it's like you're caught in an electrical current that's a high watt voltage.

Most everyone is asleep, but someone is screaming...someone or something. I can't quite pinpoint where the noise is coming from, which is why I'm sure it's not one of my patients.

The screams change in volume, depending on where I walk.

It starts off as a high-pitched scream, grabbing my attention and refusing to let go, despite how many rooms I check. The intensity ebbs and flows, deceasing the closer I walk toward Alyssa's room, which caught me off guard.

I would have sworn, with Alyssa's history, that the screams were coming from her, and yet, when I reach her door, the screams become sobs, childlike in nature, and that just freaks me the hell out.

Give me the screams any day. Those I can handle. Those, I can ignore until it's just white noise. Childlike crying though, that tears at me, and I'll do anything and everything to make it stop.

The minute I open Alyssa's door - the crying stops, and she's sitting in bed, eyes blinking a mile a minute as if she's playing out a scene in her head and her eyes are the projector.

"Alyssa." The blinking stops as she turns her gaze my way.

I watch as she adjusts, focuses, and then sighs as if I'm the last person she wants to see, or better yet as if she's disappointed at my presence.

Well, fuck you too.

"They're not welcome. Tell them to go away. Shoo. Shoo." Her hands flutter in my direction, and I can't help but look around.

Who the fuck is she talking to?

"Alyssa, do you know where you are?"

She closes her eyes and turns away. "In Hell. Exactly, where He said I would be." Her tone is full of disappointment and acceptance.

I glance down at the file in my hands and look through the sheets. There's documentation of her hallucinations, believing she's visited by the Devil, and plagued by demons.

"The Asylum is hellish, I'll give you that. But you're not in Hell."

I stop myself from saying, 'not yet'.

Her head turns until she's looking at me, and I wonder if she sees me or if she's seeing something else entirely.

"Who are you?" Her voice cracks, and I wonder if I'm seeing the real Alyssa, or the Alyssa she's been hiding behind.

Alyssa suffers from derealization disorder, amongst other things. She basically lives within a dreamlike world and has episodes where she wakes up, or is aware of the real world around her.

The notes in her file aren't clear if she's aware of her state, if she has control over which reality she resides in, but it always makes me wonder.

I'm not a psychologist, and I don't pretend to be one or even understand what my patients have gone through. My only role is to help facilitate the ease of their death.

"Are you Jack. The Jack?" She emphasizes that last sentence and my

chest pushes out a little.

"So you've heard about me?"

Her body gives a little shudder. Oh, she's heard of me all right.

"Will you help me, Jack? He says you can't, that nothing and no one can help me, but..." her voice trails, softens, and instead of an old woman at the edge of death, I see a glimpse of her younger self.

"He's a liar, Alyssa. You know that, don't you?"

She licks her dry, chapped lips and gives a very small nod. "It's hard not to listen though, you don't understand. He's always around, whispering in my ear, screaming across the room, laughing...always laughing at me."

I feel for her. I do. Living in that hell must be hard. Living in reality has to be harder, though, considering the guilt that must weigh her down.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I let the question hover, not bothering to explain what I mean

by it. It could be the Devil who whispers in her ear, or it could be what happened to bring her here, or it could cover so many other instances in her life.

"Will it help?" Her mouselike voice tugs at my heartstrings, and I find myself reaching for the blanket I brought in and draping it across her legs.

"It might. My mother used to tell me the best medicine was a listening ear. She made this, by the way. I thought you might appreciate a little bit of a woman's touch in this room."

"Before I die, you mean." She's not looking at me. Instead, her long, pale fingers lightly stroke the knitted throw, as if she'd never felt anything so soft.

"I used to knit," she says, the smile obvious. "I would make baby blankets, little sweaters and hats, and booties for all family and friends. I'd place them in welcome baskets and knit extra for the hospital too. Knitting was soothing, especially in the evenings, in front of a fire, after all the chores were done."

"My mother still does that."

I said the wrong thing. Tears gather in her cloudy eyes.

"I'd like to talk before he comes back. He won't come while you're here, I don't think. But they," she lifts her fingers and points behind me, "need to leave. They'll tell him everything. Tell them to go, please."

I have no idea what she's seeing, not even sure if she sees me clearly. I glance behind me, but there's nothing there, nothing other than the doorframe I'm leaning on.

"Go on then," I say with a firm voice. "You're not welcome in here." Maybe she sees the ghosts that follow me. Perhaps she sees something of her own making. Regardless, there's a window of clarity that I want to take advantage of.

I know Alyssa's story. Well, I think I do. We all know her story, or we've heard of it with countless other women. Go on the internet and look up other women in her situation, and you'll find dozens of names, examples, sad stories.

I've always had one question though when it came to Alyssa.

Had the Devil always visited her, or was it something else that caused her to drown her child in a bathtub?

# CHAPTER THREE

ALYSSA TO JACK

*I don't know how to do this, Jack. It's hard to know what's real and what's not. I'm not sure if you understand. Was everything imagined, or did it really happen?*

*My doctors say it's all in my head, that I've created this fantasy world, but who would create a life where the Devil is their lifelong companion? Given a choice, I wouldn't.*

*Would you?*

*I grew up in a Christian home, Jack. I was raised to know the difference between good and evil. We held hands for every meal and prayed for God's blessing. I said the Lord's Prayer every night on my knees and was raised never to say the Lord's name in vain or wish anything evil on anyone.*

*My father was a preacher. My mother a Sunday school teacher. Father preached Hell and brimstone from the pulpit and rebuked Satan every chance he got. Any sign of disobedience or laziness was a sign you were under the influence of a demon, and it was immediately cast out.*

*Satan was real. As real as God and the heavenly angels.*

*Father warned the Devil came in sheep's clothing, that he masqueraded about under the guise of innocence, and I was raised to always be on guard, to always wear the armor of God.*

*When things happened, you can only imagine the disappointment my father felt toward me. My mother...she wouldn't even look me in the eyes when I went to her for help.*

*Do you know what it's like to not have your parents there, helping you at the worst moment of your life? I always knew I would need to follow the rules, be the good girl, the godly young woman they'd raised me to be.*

*I didn't think they'd shun me.*

*Back then, especially in that world, virtue was everything. It was a commodity, even though you'd never hear a Christian speak of it like that.*

*Your virtue, your virginity, it's something you give to the man who wed. They call it a gift, something you give your husband, but it's a price, a payment, really.*

*If that virtue isn't there, the man has been ripped off, promised something that wasn't available. If a woman gives up her virginity, regardless of the reason or circumstance, that's the end of the world for her. She's shunned, cast out, fallen.*

*Fallen...that's a funny word to use in this situation, isn't it?*

*Fallen was an ugly word, a swear word, in the church. Fallen angels are demonized now, having turned their back on God, on his word and directives.*

*A fallen woman is one who sinned. Subconsciously, we believe there's no difference between what happened to me then what happened to those angels who fell from grace.*

*Maybe that's why I know what the Devil tells me is true - there's no forgiveness for one such as me. I'm no better than he is.*

*The Devil doesn't always lie.*

# CHAPTER FOUR

ALYSSA

I was eighteen when I realized I was six months pregnant.

I'd never had a boyfriend, never been kissed, not really and truly kissed, never had sex, if you can believe that.

Eighteen, and my life changed forever.

We had a guest speaker come for the weekend. He was to preach on the Sunday, both morning and evening services, but Father liked to invite the guests to come for the weekend, and on the Saturday, he would play host and show the itinerary pastors around our area.

I grew up in cottage country, and Father's favorite golf course was forty-five minutes away, so the only time he would play was when we had guests over.

From spring to fall, we often had guests come to the house and preach on Sundays. My favorites were the missionaries. I used to love sitting at the kitchen table and listen to their stories about life in Africa or Russia or China.

I'd always dreamed of being a missionary one day. I know my mother used to hope that one of the young men who came to the house would end up being my husband, to her having me follow in her footsteps as a minister's wife was the ultimate dream.

I'm not sure why, because she never seemed happy. I always thought she hated her life. Or maybe it was my father she hated.

When we had guests come over, I was always on my best behavior. Any plans I had with friends were canceled because this

was the life I was called to - one of ministry - and ministry always starts in the home.

I first met Daniel Marshall by surprise.

I came home from school expecting the house to be empty. It was a Friday, and I knew there was a special prayer meeting happening all day. Knowing no one would be home till later in the evening, I had made plans with a friend to sleep over at her house and had just come home to grab some things.

It wasn't until I walked up the stairs that I realized I wasn't alone.

A man was exiting the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist.

Was this the first time I'd ever seen a half-naked man? Why, yes, it was.

I swear my skin blazed red within seconds, and I quickly turned and ran down the stairs into the kitchen, hoping that what I'd just witnessed had been a hallucination.

There was a man in my house. A half-naked man that wasn't much older than me. He had the body a girl only knew about in her dreams if you know what I mean. His blond hair was damp and messy, and his Irish green eyes were so vibrant, I swear he could see straight through into my soul.

I mentioned I grew up very secluded, right? So much so that I'd only ever seen a boy without his shirt on from a distance. I wasn't allowed to attend pool parties, especially at the town pool, because you could never trust what went on with unsupervised kids wearing tight bathing suits. If I went to the beach, there had better be an adult present, and I could only hang with my girlfriends. If boys from the church showed up, they usually wore shirts out of respect for us girls.

My parents made sure to keep my circle of friends tight and close. I was only allowed to hang with those who held the same strict beliefs as us.

Which means, me alone in the house with a man was a huge

no-no.

Usually, if my mother wasn't home, she'd leave me a note on the fridge with chores she wanted me to do or tell me where she was. Today, there was no note.

I could hear his footsteps on the floor above me. Mortified, I ran outside to the backyard and grabbed a pair of garden gloves. There was no way I was going back in that house until either my mother or father returned home.

I've no idea how long it was, but eventually, I wasn't alone.

"Sorry about that. I'm Daniel. I'm assuming you're Alyssa?" His voice was smooth, like freshly churned vanilla ice cream.

I didn't want to look at him, so I turned my head a little but kept my gaze on the rose bush I was de-heading.

The back door slammed so hard I jumped.

"Oh, Alyssa, there you are. I went to your school to pick you up on my way to grab the groceries, but I must have missed you." My mother's voice, high pitched and full of panic, rang loud.

"Daniel, I spoke with my husband, and he's on his way. We've got a light dinner set up at the church for you." She holds the door open and waits for him to join her. He takes a second, and I notice him looking at me. I quickly turn my gaze, but I have no doubt my mother hasn't missed my rosy cheeks.

I stay outside until I hear the car door slam announcing my father is home.

I remain out there until I hear them leave, too.

It doesn't take my mother long to join me out in the backyard. She brings a tray with some tea and a few homemade cookies with her and waits till I sit down on the picnic table before she begins to grill me.

"Where were you? If I'd known you weren't going to be waiting for me, I never would have left the house. Please tell me you weren't alone in the house with him? If you'd been at the school where I expected you to be, then we wouldn't be in this pickle. You've no idea how that is going to look."

The inhale of shock when I tell her what happened might as well have been a direct slap to my face.

Why did I tell her? That's what a good daughter does - share intimate details with a mother who is supposed to protect you from harm.

Do I regret it? Yes.

One little action, combined with another little action, can create a reaction that proves to be life-changing. That's what happened that day to me. A series of little actions that led to me being in here.

Instead of going to my girlfriend's house for a sleepover, I was forced to attend the prayer meeting, where I sank down to my knees, bowed my head, and prayed for God's forgiveness.

I could feel the sharp eyes of my parents that whole evening as if they suddenly didn't trust me, even though I'd done absolutely nothing wrong.

Well, now I know I did nothing wrong. Then, I took on the guilt of being in the house, alone, with a man just coming out of the shower, even though it wasn't my fault.

I wasn't allowed out of their sight that whole night. I remember almost peeing my pants, I had to go so bad, but every time I went to stand, my mother would wrap her hand around my thigh and squeeze until I sank back down.

I ended up with a very bruised thigh that night.

Daniel Marshall led the prayer service that night. He also led the full-day prayer sanctuary event on Saturday. We had many guest speakers over the years, but never one so young and charismatic at the same time. I swear he could talk a car salesman into buying his own overpriced vehicle. He sure had everyone in the pews believing his words.

Me included.

One thing my father harped on constantly from both the pulpit and our dinner table was the sin of lust. It was the gateway to all other sins, he said. Lusting after money. After fame. After success.

Lust meant being unhappy with all that God has graciously provided for us. The worst kind of lust, in my father's opinion, was lusting after another person.

Saturday, all I did was lust and then pray, even beg, for forgiveness. I would get lost in Daniel Marshall's dreamy eyes, and then I'd remember what he looked like with only a towel covering his perfect muscular form.

I was full of sin that day.

I couldn't wait till that evening when we were back at home. I already knew it would be a quiet night; Daniel had requested it over breakfast, saying he wanted to stay in a continual atmosphere of quiet contemplation before he spoke again on Sunday.

A quiet evening at home meant I had Daniel all to myself. Well, it meant I could stare at him, talk with him, get to know him more than anyone else in the church.

Daniel Marshall was a catch, and all the single women wanted to be the one to snare his heart.

Me included. He was only a few years older than me. He was twenty-four where I was eighteen. From the way my parents eyed us both over dinner, I could tell that they were hoping for something to happen between us.

They made it evident when they sent us both to the sitting room to chat and took care of the post-dinner chores.

Daniel Marshall was everything I expected him to be. Courteous, friendly, attentive...he gave me all the feels. I couldn't stop smiling that night, and I'm sure the glow on my face gave away everything I didn't bother to hide.

He was the perfect gentleman, too, maintaining enough distance between us to be respectful but not being shy about reaching out and touching my arm or even my hand to show his interest.

By the time my parents joined us and brought small dessert bowls full of fresh fruit and cream, there was a connection between us.

I was smitten by the angel face of Daniel Marshall, and he knew it too.

I went to bed with a smile on my face, and I dreamed of wedding bells and white dresses, of being swept off my feet and falling deeply and truly in love.

I like to sleep with the window open, even in winter. That night, there was a breeze. I remember that because something woke me up, and I remember watching the curtains move, moonlight filling the room with each sweep of the fabric.

I wasn't alone. Not anymore.

Someone was pressed tight to my body, his arms wrapped around my waist, his lips nuzzling my neck.

Before I could say anything, my face was pushed into my pillow, my nightdress bunched around my waist, a shushing sound whispered into my ear before I could say anything.

"You're God's gift to me. I prayed for an angel, and there you were. Just relax and be God's vessel."

I'll never forget those words. Never forget the way they were whispered, like a snake hissing in the grass. I'll also never forget the feeling of shame as I struggled to breathe or the way he told me to go clean up, but be quiet about it unless I want to go to hell.

I wish I'd known at that moment, I was already there.

# CHAPTER FIVE

ALYSSA TO JACK

*In case you didn't catch on, I was raped that night.*

*I was so innocent, so naive, that I didn't realize what happened.*

*I had no idea what sex was, Jack. How could I - that wasn't something talked about at home, other than sex was a sin if done outside of the marriage bed.*

*I knew what happened was wrong, but I wasn't sure why. Does that even make sense?*

*Having a man join me in my bed - that was wrong.*

*What he did to my body - wrong.*

*But it was the words he used, that I was God's gift to him, that my role was to be used as a vessel...that's what screwed me in the head. I mean...he was a man of God, a preacher, a minister of the gospel...he wasn't a man who would sin, so what he did to me...that couldn't have been wrong, right?*

*I didn't dare tell my parents. I laid there in my bed, crying, for the rest of the night, afraid to go to the washroom in case I woke one of them up.*

*The following day, any guesses what the sermon was about?*

*Adam and Eve - how Eve was a temptress and the Devil will bring temptations into our lives, but we need to rebuke the Devil and turn from everything evil. At one point, he looked right at me when he talked about Eve - making me feel like I was a temptation.*

*I thought I was a vessel, though? How could I be both?*

*It didn't take long for my mother to notice the bloodstains on both*

*my nightdress and my bedsheets. All hell broke loose then within the four walls of my home.*

*I don't think I need to tell you what happened.*

*I seduced Daniel Marshall. I was the sinner, filled with the demon of lust and desire, and how could I do that to a man of God?*

*An emergency prayer meeting was called with only those within my father's inner circle, those he trusted the most. The prayer meeting was for me. Every single person there laid their hands on me and rebuked the Devil that was within me. They cast out so many demons that filled my soul, my body was bruised from all their slaps, pushes, and even the flogging I received from my father.*

*I was shamed. Forced to beg forgiveness and kept under lock and key until my mother confirmed I'd missed a period and was indeed pregnant.*

*You have no idea what that is like for a woman, especially one raised like I was. My life was over as I knew it.*

# CHAPTER SIX

ALYSSA

Of course, I wasn't the first girl to ever find myself in this situation.

I grew up hearing the whispers, noticing girls disappearing from classes and moving to help an ailing relative. I knew the snickers were derogatory, the tsks disappointing, but I never really clued into what they all meant.

Suddenly, that girl was me. My parents weren't going to play the game others had played though, they had only one goal for their disgraced daughter: marriage.

The dynamic, highly sought-after preacher returned to our church one Sunday morning. He preached about the Good Samaritan, reminding us all how we were to be Christ-like and help those who others cast aside.

I felt like Daniel Marshall was preaching at me, telling me I was the degenerate sinner, and he was the only one willing to reach out.

He came to join us for lunch that afternoon, and that's when I found out we were to be married.

I was being forced into a marriage with my rapist all because he'd gotten me pregnant, and my parents didn't want that shame, my shame, to be on their shoulders.

My mother pulled me into the kitchen to help with dishes. She told me I should be grateful that he agreed to marry me, that my father had to degrade himself and beg the man to marry me. I should count my blessings and thank God every day this man

agreed to save me.

It makes me sick now to think about it, but then, I cried with relief to know my shame would be hidden.

Marrying Daniel Marshall so quickly meant no one would know my child was born in sin.

I'm not sure if this happens a lot anymore, but back then, it was common. Ministers, preachers, those who stood behind pulpits, they were the worst sinners. I'm sure they still are. All those you see on the television, they're liars. The harder they preach against sin, the darker their own hearts are.

Don't let them fool you, Jack.

It was a very small garden wedding. God forbid I get married in a church. Our engagement lasted twenty-one days. My father provided the ring, a thin band that belonged to his mother, and I wore my mother's wedding dress. My flowers were a gift from my soon-to-be-husband, and I made my own wedding cake. We had maybe a handful of guests, and an hour after we said our vows, Daniel said it was time to leave.

I had three weeks to adjust to my new life. Three weeks of going from innocent teen to pregnant woman to pregnant and married.

We drove eight hours, crossed state lines, and arrived in a small town with quaint houses and a busy main street.

I stared in wonder at the sites. This town, my new home, looked bigger than the one I grew up in.

We pulled up to a bungalow style home with a white picket fence and a front porch. The house was adorable, everything and more than I could have hoped for.

Turns out the house was newly bought, thanks to my father and the church for their generous donation.

My father had to bribe my rapist to marry me. Let that sink in a little.

Marriage was...not what I expected.

Marriage to Daniel Marshall was...more than I thought it would

be.

Being married brought along a safety net for Daniel. His speaking requests increased, and he was gone more than he was home. He started traveling around the country, leaving me at home more often than not. A few times, I was included in the invitation, especially if it was to a church he'd visited in the past. The novelty of the most eligible bachelor being taken was a sight to be seen, I guess. Everyone wanted to see for themselves the woman that stole Daniel's heart.

Everyone was left wanting because I never measured up, no matter how perfect I tried to be.

Daniel had a silver forked tongue. He could heap praise in twisted ways. To the casual listener, they would have thought Daniel and I were the love story of the century, but if you truly listened to his words, if you caught the way his arm tightened around me, how he would speak for me rather than give me time to respond, how he would put me down without making it sound that way...then you would see that we weren't the perfect couple.

Speak only when spoken to - that's what Daniel wanted.

When he was home, I was ignored unless he wanted something. Food, beverage, sex...when he wanted and only when he wanted. My opinion didn't matter. In his eyes, I was a burden more than anything else. I stole from him the opportunity to find true love.

I. Stole. From. Him.

In those first few months, I did everything I could to make him happy, to make our marriage work. I followed my mother's example - don't ruffle feathers, always have a hot meal waiting, and put him first before my needs. I thought about the virtuous woman in the bible, the one that is blessed, and tried to portray her in all ways. I didn't want to be a burden because I knew that's not what God would have wanted from me.

Early on, I would call home often, but the phone would hang up at the sound of my voice. It took me a little bit to clue in that they were too ashamed of my sin and that they had disowned me.

Until I realized that, I called and called and called, often to the point of tears, just needing to hear my mother's voice, to get some advice, some help...that wasn't asking too much, was it?

Apparently, it was.

Daniel was the one who made me realize the fool I'd been. He heard me dialing the phone one evening and told me to hang up. He said I was his responsibility now, and my parents wanted nothing to do with me.

I hid in the bedroom that night, crying until I fell asleep. Daniel woke me up because I was sobbing even in my sleep.

I'm not sure I've ever cried that hard before or since.

My heart was broken despite knowing deep down my parents wanted nothing to do with me.

I didn't understand how parental love could turn off like that.

It's possible they never loved me, to begin with. Not the way they should have.

I remember making a vow that night that I would never treat my child like that, that I would love them with every fibre of my being, and that I would do everything I could to protect them.

I don't regret that vow.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

ALYSSA TO JACK

*Jack, isn't that a parent's job? To protect your child? To move heaven and hell to make sure they are safe and loved?*

*Even now, after all these years, I still struggle with how easy it was for my parents to disown me.*

*Didn't they love me? Wasn't I enough for them?*

*I should have been.*

*No one is perfect. My father sure wasn't. My mother, even though she tried to portray the ideal image, she struggled too. I saw it every day, and I felt for her. I remember trying so hard to help her, copying her every move, trying to be just like her.*

*She used to call me her little helper because I was always there, willing to take on any chore, to help in any way.*

*I just wanted to be loved, and I realized at an early age, to be loved, I had to meet and exceed expectations.*

*I don't think my parents should have had children.*

*I know my mother struggled with miscarriages. I believe she had one or two before I was born and then another two afterward. Maybe that broke her? Perhaps she couldn't help herself?*

*I have this memory of Mom cuddling with me in bed when I was younger. She would read these Christian nursery rhymes to me - they were the Jesus loves me version of Mother Goose.*

*It's funny, but when our baby was born, someone gave us the exact same book my mother used to read to me. The Christian Mother Goose Big Book. Did you ever read it? I can still see it in my mind's eye; a*

*light colored book with Humpty Dumpty and Mother Goose on the front. I used to love that book.*

*I used to daydream about what it would be like to be a mother. I knew it would all be worth it - being forced to marry a man who didn't love me, who saw me as a means to an end. As long as I had my child or children, I would be happy. I used to believe that. I really did.*

*Daniel never loved me. I was a warm body, a servant, a showpiece when he needed it. Life as an unwed preacher was hard for him. But once he was married, the doors opened like crazy - maybe because people were no longer worried about their innocent daughters.*

*That didn't matter to him, though. What he did with me, he did with others. If someone offered to host them in their home, they should have locked their daughter's bedroom doors. I'm sure he fathered other children, but if he did, he never told me.*

*Daniel Marshal was a demon in disguise. I knew it the minute I woke up to him in my bed, and I still believe it now.*

*I'd better meet him in Hell. He's the one responsible for our child's death, not me. No one would believe me, though. Not then, not now.*

*Does it matter? I think so. Don't you, Jack? Doesn't the truth matter?*

*I've never understood why I was never believed.*

*No, that's not true. I know why. Satan is a master of disguises. He was, after all, once the Angel of Light, was he not?*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ALYSSA

I had a difficult pregnancy. From about five months on, I was in constant pain, and no one would believe me. It felt like my insides were being shredded apart, but the doctor told me that was all in my head, and it was just the baby moving.

I was told to relax, that stress only did more harm.

Daniel kept me housebound and wouldn't let me go to church, using the excuse that I was having difficulty with the pregnancy. It was all true, I was, but not doing anything, having to remain stress-free isn't as easy as you would think it was.

I started having nightmares around the six-month mark. Not just the regular nightmares when you're falling in midair or your body is being consumed by tiny spider bites, but hellish ones, where I'm being engulfed by flames, but my body never burned, where I'd be buried alive in a wood casket, but no one heard me screaming in fear.

The worst type of nightmares was when I was being held down by demons. They raped me, over and over, one by one. I can see their grotesque faces above mine, their poisoned saliva dripping onto my skin, their eyes black and void. They don't just rape me with their penises, but with their claws and tails and any other type of objects, they can find. I scream to the point where my throat muscles are ripped to pieces, but there's never any sound.

I'd wake up with their touch still on my skin. I would swear they were still in me, raping me, in those early morning hours.

I still get those nightmares.

Do you think that's Satan's way of telling me what to expect once I die?

I think it is.

In the beginning, I would wake Daniel up and ask him to pray for me. That's what a godly couple does, right? They pray together, share their deep thoughts, trust one another completely…

Daniel would pray, sure. Not for my comfort. Not for my peace. He'd rebuke the Devil in me. He would lay hands on my head and denounce the evil in me, then pray for God to wrap his hands around my womb to protect his child.

His child. Not ours.

Around the seventh month mark, I started getting the worse pains imaginable rip across my stomach. They would start on one hip and arch across to the other. My stomach would end up bruised with harsh lines - they looked like lightning strikes or flames - and my skin would be so discolored.

The first time Daniel saw it, he blamed me for not being careful, for wanting to harm our child. I told him it wasn't my fault, I begged him to believe me repeatedly, but he never did.

I remember him once talking to someone, and they threw out the idea of having me hospitalized until they realized how it would look.

I wish they had gone through with it. I wish Daniel had believed me when I said something was wrong instead of telling me it was all in my head that I was at fault.

I wish someone would have believed me.

One morning, after I'd lumbered into the kitchen, I found Mrs. Peggy Turner, our neighbor, sitting at the table, sipping a cup of tea. Daniel was nowhere to be found.

She told me she was there to help out, make me comfortable, and make sure nothing happened to the baby or me. She wouldn't let me lift a finger, had breakfast waiting every morning, always a hot soup and sandwich for lunch, and then even made sure there

was a warm meal for Daniel when he came home.

She wasn't just there to make sure I followed doctors' orders though. Daniel truly believed I was physically harming myself and the baby. He truly thought I was demon possessed.

I believed it too.

I started to believe that the baby growing inside me was actually a demon and that it wasn't Daniel who raped me but the Devil himself.

I can't begin to tell you what that does to a woman's frame of mind.

Every night, before bed, he would pray over me. Think of it as an exorcism. He'd hold the bible tight against my body - my chest, my belly, my head - and rebuke the influence of the Devil, casting him out, protecting me in the name of Jesus.

Nothing changed. The pain still came. The fears were still there. The nightmares got worse. So I did the one thing I thought would work: I went on a fasting strike, only drinking broth for the baby, prayed most of the time I was awake, and I read scriptures out loud almost all day. By the time Daniel came home many evenings, my voice was hoarse and crackly from speaking so much.

Did I help? No. I became weak, and at my next doctor's appointment, I had lost too much weight and was told to start eating or I'd be hospitalized.

I didn't want to go to the hospital, so I started to eat. The pain continued, and there were times it was as continual, without breaks, to the point that I'd pass out.

I started wondering if a demon, or even Satan himself, was causing the bruises…or that maybe, just maybe, I had a monster growing inside of me, and it was manifesting these bruises to show its existence.

What type of baby would come out of me. One with horns and hooved feet?

I had to stop sharing so much with Daniel. I could see how he looked at me, wondering if I were crazy. I wasn't…not then. I was

just scared. Nervous. Fearful.

I was a child still. A child, having a child, forced to wed my rapist, who made sure to remind me how lucky I was he took pity on me.

What a fucked up world I grew up in. Sorry, Jack, for the language.

Around the eight-month mark was when I started bleeding. I was immediately put on bed rest.

Daniel called me lazy. Said I was over exaggerating.

Two weeks later, I was admitted into the hospital where they could monitor me and make sure I stayed in bed. In public, Daniel made a show of being the faithful, by-my-side, husband. He came to visit every day when he wasn't traveling - which, by that time, he was rarely home.

When he returned, he would tell me how he had the congregations all pray for me, that they're holding round-the-clock prayer meeting for our baby, that I should stop worrying because God wouldn't let anything bad happen to our child.

Around the nine-month mark, I remember being so tired of just lying in bed. I'd knitted so many baby blankets and sweaters and dresses and little hats and booties. In fact, I'd knitted so many that I donated a lot of them to the maternity ward.

I've done that for years now, did you know? We would have craft sessions in the nursery, and the nurses trusted me with a crochet hook. Not knitting needles because those can be dangerous, but the crocket hook was okay. I've made so many baby items…it makes me happy to know they're being used by someone in some hospital.

The pains never stopped, but I had hoped that Daniel would realize I wasn't harming myself once I was in the hospital. Surely the doctors and nurses would notice what was happening…or so I thought.

They didn't believe it was possible that the unborn child in me could bruise the skin across my stomach. I ended up being in

restraints unless there was someone who would sit with me.

Mrs. Peggy Turner ended being my constant companion during most of the day.

I don't really remember much of the woman. She was tiny with tight silver curls in her hair. She liked tea and would often hum hymns. She would sit in the rocking chair, knitting needles in hand, and watch me as she knitted socks and mittens and hats for her grandchildren.

Sometimes she would give me advice. Often times she just remained quiet. Always watching, always judging, or so it felt like it.

Sometimes I would ask her for marital advice. She would remind me that it was my place to make Daniel happy, to not be a burden as he followed God's calling on his life. My role was to be obedient, trust him to be the head of the house, and raise our children so they would follow after their father.

What if I didn't want our children to be pastors, though? What if I wanted more out of my life?

That wasn't for me. My role was to be supportive, stand by my husband's side, and always place him first.

I finally stopped asking for marriage advice.

It was getting closer to my due date, and I remember praying that the baby would come on time, not late.

That fear that I was giving birth to a demon dissipated, and I started to let myself get excited for this baby. I would daydream about holding my child close, singing lullabies, breathing in that fresh born smell, lighting up at their first smile, first laugh…I couldn't wait to be a mother.

Daniel promised to be around, not travel, and be there as our child was born. I tried not to ask for much, but I kept asking, begging, pleading until he finally promised not to leave. He made sure I realized that it was a huge inconvenience for him, that it severely hit us financially…which I realized years later was his passive-aggressive way of making me feel guilty for needing him.

Thankfully, my contractions started early on a Tuesday morning. Having a baby during the week meant he wouldn't have to cancel a speaking engagement, which meant there was no financial impact on us.

I was ready to meet our little one. I wanted a little girl, someone precious and adorable, someone to wear dresses and bows and play dolls with. Daniel, of course, he wanted a boy, but I knew, deep in my heart, we were having a girl.

I even had a name picked out for her. Sarah Elizabeth. Can't you see her as a cute three-year-old with pigtails and a pink dress?

By the time my contractions started, my stomach was all black and blue. Despite being in restraints or having a companion by my side, something continued to bruise my stomach and pierce me with megawatt shards of lighting. A few times, the pains happened while the nurses were in the room and saw the bruises within minutes…but no one would believe me.

It wasn't until years later that someone finally explained to me what caused the bruising, but do you know what it's like to live with the fear of being hurt by a supernatural being?

[Jack here: once she described what was happening, I recognized the cause, at least, I think I do. Gestational thrombocytopenia. It's a very rare condition and one I've only ever seen once myself early on when I was rotating through a maternity ward early on in my career. Gestational thrombocytopenia means a low platelet count. I'm not surprised it wasn't diagnosed when Alyssa was pregnant. She confirmed it when I asked.]

# CHAPTER NINE

Of course, I didn't give birth to a demon child.

My little boy was perfect. He was six pounds and eight ounces of heaven. He had ten toes and ten fingers, a button shaped nose, little puff of hair and the biggest pair of eyes I'd ever seen.

He was perfect.

He rarely fussed, only cried when life was utterly unfair - like a full diaper or too long in between feedings. He liked to watch the world, took everything in, and mesmerized everyone with this thoughtful gaze.

Did I mention he was perfect?

After all the fears I had, I couldn't believe what a gift I'd been given.

I was expecting sleepless nights filled with pacing floors or rocking back and forth in the rocking chair, of being so tired I'd pour coffee in my cereal bowl and napping during the day when the baby finally fell asleep.

None of that happened.

Peter Jacob was the type of baby who slept the night and would wait until someone came into his room before making a fuss. He would seem tuned into my moods during the days - and never minded the cuddle time when I wanted to hold him close, or being placed in his little carrier when I needed my hands free to get dinner ready for Daniel.

I remember the first time I went back to church, everyone wanted to hold him. I thought for sure he'd react to all the strangers, but it was as if he knew what was expected of him and

seemed content to be passed from one stranger's arms to another.

We never lacked for childcare, all the grandmothers in our church wanting their turn to take care of the pastor's baby. Nor did I lack advice on how to raise Peter Jacob, when to give him solids, and how to bathe him properly.

I might not have had anyone in my life to teach me the ways of being a newly married pastor's wife, but I sure had plenty of help when it came to raising our son.

Daniel called my parents to tell them of their grandchild. They never sent gifts. Never asked to visit. Never wanted pictures.

In fact, I never spoke to my mother or father again following our wedding.

Being a mother - it was everything I thought it would be and more. It filled my soul, taking care of this child. He was a gift to me, a gift from God, and despite how he was conceived, I would do it over and over again if it meant being able to hold that precious bundle in my arms.

I fell in love the moment he was laid in my arms, and I've never stopped loving him, even though he's dead.

Even though I killed him.

Peter Jacob hit all his milestones with grace. He was the type of child everyone loved. He was so mild mannered, never lost his temper, never threw a fit, never acted out - in public or even at home.

Daniel said it was because of all the prayer time during my pregnancy. He said if it hadn't been for him, Peter Jacob wouldn't be so perfect.

Around the time our son turned three months, Daniel started taking on more itinerate offers, claiming adding a child to the mix was expensive. He started being home two nights of the week, and then it became two nights every two weeks. I remember there being times he wouldn't be home at all that month, claiming it was cheaper for him to stay in the area of where he was preaching rather than drive or fly home all the time.

I became a single mother, basically. If it had been any other child but Peter Jacob, I'm not sure I would have survived.

While Daniel travelled all over America preaching, I continued to attend his home church, making sure to show up at all the services and even becoming more active in the woman's weekly bible study. The church women were mother hens, taking care of me while Daniel was away.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I can remember the exact moment when I started to wonder if there was anything wrong with Peter Jacob.

I mentioned he was a quiet child, right? So quiet, he barely spoke, and when he did, it was all gibberish, even at the age of two.

The senior pastor's wife said he was anointed by God and speaking in tongues.

Daniel said he was speaking directly to God and to give our miraculous child the space to do so.

Botton line, everyone at the church thought our child was God-touched, but me.

One morning, when I walked into Peter Jacob's room, I found him sitting cross-legged, staring into his closet. He didn't hear me come in, his focus so intent on the dark space in front of him.

One minute he was just staring, the other he nodded and started to speak, his hands waving around him, his voice low, deep, and dark. So very dark.

There was a look on his face, one I didn't recognize.

I'm serious. I didn't recognize my own child.

It was as if his bone structure had changed, and the face was of someone else entirely.

Someone older. More mature. Not a two-year-old child, and especially not my child.

I called out his name, and his body jerked - nothing huge, just a little twitch, really - but I caught it. I noticed. I think he knew I noticed because for one brief instant, the smile on his face turned

into a smirk.

In one breath, one blink of the eye, my child returned to me. But it was at that moment I knew something was wrong.

No mother wants to believe there's something wrong with their child. I certainly didn't. Yet, I watched, studied, and kept vigil over my son, but I never saw a repeat of what happened.

That didn't mean I let my guard down, though.

The enemy, he comes to seek, to kill, and to destroy. I knew all too well how he works, like a thief in the night, using the darkness for cover.

I wouldn't let him steal my child from me.

That promise I'd made while pregnant, I meant it. I would do everything and anything to protect my son, even if it meant protecting him from the Devil.

[Jack here: we're taking a little bit of a break. Alyssa is struggling with tears, and her eyes are clenched shut. I'm watching her self-control her reactions, and it's quite impressive. It's evident she's undergone a lot of counseling, especially regarding this moment in her life.]

Jack, a mother knows. I'm sure your mother does. She knows when something is wrong, doesn't she? I knew, with my son. I knew, even when no one else did.

I was able to see past the mask. Peter Jacob, he wore a costume, or he was the costume for the evil that resided in him. No one believes me, not my husband, not the other ministers or the women who pretended to be my friends...but I knew. A mother always knows, Jack.

Always.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, my son was normal. Other than not speaking much, he was a regular child who loved to play outside, enjoyed getting dirty, catching bugs, and scaring me with them. He loved his toys, and playing games, and spending time

with me.

He was definitely a mama's boy.

One of his favorite games he liked to play was to scare me. He'd pop out of the most obvious spots at first, and I'd pretend to be startled. Then he began to up his game, thanks to Daniel when he was home, and he would begin hiding for real. At first, it was harmless pranks ... he'd be in the food closet, beneath the sink, in my closet, behind the shower curtain. It progressed to longer hiding times, so much so that I couldn't hide my panic as I searched the house or the yard for him, worried he'd actually taken off down the street.

He also liked to scare me with bugs. Snails, worms, spiders, moths, it didn't matter what type, he knew anything creepy crawly would do the trick.

I remember going to bed one night and pulling back the covers to find a handful of spiders skitter about once exposed to the light. I screamed so loud I'm sure the neighbors across the street heard me.

We didn't do Halloween for obvious reasons. Instead, we did a harvest festival at the church with all the children and teenagers. Kids could dress up, but nothing scary, demonic, or inappropriate.

Peter Jacob always wanted to dress up like his father. We borrowed a suit from another church member, slicked his hair back, and gave him a large bible to carry around. He was the cutest thing, and everyone thought that he wanted to dress up like a preacher was a sure sign from heaven.

It's important to remember, though, the Satan can often disguise himself as an angel.

Even at his young age, my son did not exhibit a fascination with death - even though you would think a child possessed would. He was fascinated with pain and blood. He would find injured birds from our backyard and poke and prod, see how much pain they could handle before dying. Every scrape he received, he never cried, never screamed, never seemed to be in pain...he'd make the

wound wider, deeper, bleed more, to understand the feelings he was experiencing.

I almost wondered if my son didn't feel pain.

It was confirmed he didn't when he tipped over my teapot full of scalding water. It covered his lap, but he didn't cry, he didn't even scream as the recently boiled water soaked through his pants even.

In fact, when I rushed him into the bathroom to wash him down, his skin hadn't even turned red. His pants were soaked, they still felt hot to the touch, but his skin was dry as a sun-kissed boulder.

I'm not making this up, Jack. I swear.

His gibberish talking didn't stop. By the age of three, he was speaking more. He wasn't one for eloquent sentences, but he'd say enough to get the message across.

I want a cookie, please.

We go play, Mama?

Let's read a story, please, Mama?

That's how he spoke with me or when anyone was around. It's not how he spoke all the time, though. I'd walk down the hall and hear his voice: not a childish, cute boyish voice, but a more mature, deep, and authoritative voice. I never understood what he was saying, but he spoke fast, furious, and would often pause as if listening to someone else talk back.

It scared me, Jack.

I would ask him who he was talking to, thinking he'd say his imaginary friend. I was wrong.

My legion.

That's what he said, Jack. He didn't say his name was Legion, like in the bible, instead, he said he was talking to his legion. What child at the age of three knows that language?

In the bible, I think it's in Mark, when Jesus cast a demon by the name of Legion into a herd of pigs who then fell off a cliff. Do you remember that story, Jack?

I had a talk with Daniel about it. He reminded me that in the book of Matthew, when Jesus was about to be arrested, he also spoke of a legion of angels who would come to help Peter if he ever needed it. Daniel was positive our Peter Jacob was in tune with God, that he heard things in the spiritual realm no one else could.

He was wrong. Our child was in tune with a spiritual realm, all right, but not the one my husband assumed.

I didn't need someone to tell me my child was possessed. I knew it.

# CHAPTER TEN

Jack, we need to hurry. I can hear his voice, feel the tendrils of his slimy tongue touching my skin. He's coming back...

[Jack here: the fear on Alyssa's face is vivid, and the goosebumps that run along her skin are sudden. Ike was passing by just then, and I asked him for a heated blanket. Not sure if it helped or not, but who doesn't love a warm blanket being placed on their lap?]

Children are special, Jack. They really are. Their souls are so pure, their innocence so true, that it's no wonder they are in tune to the ways of the spirit world. I used to think Peter Jacob could see the angels that watched over him, that when he was cooing in his crib, chubby little hands reaching out, he was reaching out to the feathers on their wings, mesmerized by their glory.

Most children are like that, you know? Their innocence pierces that veil that separates most humans from what else is out there.

Daniel truly believed our child to be special. And he was.

Peter Jacob was a special child, intended for great things...but what those things were, that's where Daniel and I disagreed.

He should have been home more, been with our son on a more daily basis, then he would have understood. Then he would have seen.

Since I was the one with Peter Jacob, I saw it all. I heard it all. I understood better than anyone else what our son was like, who he was and who he wasn't.

I was scared for my son, Jack. I can't stress that enough.

I saw his future, recognized the greatness within him, and knew how destructive he would be.

I gave birth to the Antichrist. I knew it deep down; I just knew it.

A mother knows these things.

My child didn't torment and kill animals for sacrifice. He didn't drink the blood of innocents. He wasn't born with horns or a tail or even cloven feet.

He was born an angel, and just like Satan, he was in disguise.

I loved him. I still do. A mother's love doesn't disappear because her child is dead. I mourn all the holidays, all those special moments like graduation and weddings and grandchildren I've never been able to experience. I mourn these never-experienced moments because I sacrificed everything to protect him.

Almost everyone disagrees with me, Jack. I hope you don't, though. I hope you understand what I'm trying to tell you. I had no choice. I had to save my child. Every day that I let the evil in him grow, I was condemning the world, and that's a heavyweight to bear.

Do you think if Hitler's mother had known the destruction her son would bring on the world, do you think she would have done everything she could to stop him? I do.

I know she would have.

Killing my son, that wasn't my first and only option. It was the last resort.

I need you to believe me, Jack.

I did everything I could think of.

I prayed over him every single day. I anointed him with oil. I cast out the demons as he slept blissfully in his bed. I rebuked the Devil on a regular basis. I read scriptures. I had hymns playing in his room while he slept.

He also memorized scriptures. The very first one I taught him was from 1 John 4:4. Do you know that one, Jack? Little children, you are from God and have overcome, for He who is in you is

greater than he who is in the world. I was so proud of him for memorizing that.

Nothing seemed to matter. He could say all the right things on command, but when he was alone, when he didn't think anyone was watching...that's when his true self came out. Even at three years of age.

Little boys at his age talk about catching the bad guy, or playing with his friends, or what he saw outside. My little boy, when he was alone, he talked about how he was going to destroy people, how he was going to be worshipped, how he was going to be a real superhero that no one has seen before.

What three-year-old talks like that?

We'd just had dinner. I made him his favorite meal - spaghetti with homemade meatballs. While I was in the kitchen washing up, he was in the living room, playing with his toy soldiers.

I could hear voices. Adult voices. Hard, angry, and scary voices.

He'd turned the television on, something he was forbidden to do. It was new, a novelty item Daniel came home with one day, claiming it was a gift from a church he'd been speaking at. I used it to watch the news every night, and that was it.

For so long, I remember hearing that watching the television was a gateway to sin, and even though the concept is ridiculous, it's hard to chip away at preconceived notions we've grown up with. Still, to this day, I'd rather read a book than watch a scripted show on television.

My son was not watching television though, even though I'd tossed the dishcloth onto the counter and stormed around the corner, into where my son sat, on the floor, staring at something in the back corner behind our couch.

Those voices I heard - they came from him. His voice changed from one person to another and then to another, all different voices, different cadences, different inflections. They were all distinct, but all were coming from his tiny body.

I must have gasped because he turned to me and smiled, a

sickening smile that sent shivers to run over my body and my stomach to roll over until I was close to vomiting.

He spoke to me. Leave us, woman.

That's what he said. In a deep, rich voice, one I'd never heard before.

Leave us, woman.

So I did. I turned and walked back into the kitchen as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

I was in a daze. Shocked. Scared. My movements were sharp as I dished out bowls of ice cream for the two of us.

I didn't even think about what I was doing. I was in a trance, my movements automatic, my decisions on autopilot.

I kept a bottle of sleeping pills in the top drawer that I kept on hand for Daniel. He had a hard time sleeping most nights, and I liked to keep a couple of his pills as a backup, in case he ran out before I could pick up another prescription from the pharmacist.

I took two pills, opened up those tiny capsules, and stirred the powder into the small bowl of ice cream meant for my son. Then I topped his desert with some strawberry jam, just as he liked it.

Two pills. One pill would have been enough. I used two, though. I don't know why.

I pretended nothing had happened as we sat at the table together.

I swear I was in shock. We talked about what adventures we would have tomorrow on our walk to the park and what book he wanted me to read as a bedtime story.

He finished his bowl, licking the spoon, but I noticed the effects start to take over.

Before he had a chance to say anything, I told him it was bath time and whisked him away into the tub.

He was so drowsy that I had to help him stand as I undressed him by this time.

I poured a good amount of bubbles into the tub and then watched as he just sat there, the lethargy taking over. He leaned

back and slowly slipped beneath the water.

I let him.

I watched as the water covered his mouth, his eyes, then his nose.

He struggled, his tiny arms splashing around, and he half sat up. His eyes opened wide as buttons, black as the midnight sky.

I know what you are doing. It won't work.

That voice again. That husky, obviously older male voice had nothing to do with my son and everything to do with whatever possessed him.

I leaned over and placed my hand on his skinny arms and turned him over, using all my strength so he couldn't fight me.

He was face down in the water, completely covered. I placed my hands on the middle of his back and wouldn't let him up.

I had the power of angels in my arms, Jack. Such super strength I've never felt before. I was standing, bent over the tub, holding the demon down in the water until there was absolutely no movement.

I continued to hold, knowing I needed to make sure to be safe. I had to kill that demon. I had to save my son, no matter what it took.

I remember sitting on the bathroom floor that night for hours, shell shocked at what had happened.

I didn't cry at first. I couldn't. I couldn't feel anything but relief. I knew something had been wrong with my Peter Jacob, I knew it with every fiber of my being...but tonight only solidified it. Never had my son talked to me like that - in another voice - never.

That was Satan talking to me. That night was the first time I heard his voice.

I've heard it every day since.

Every. Single. Day.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

AYLYSSA to JACK

*Jack, you're not saying anything.*

*Do you condemn me as everyone else has?*

*Nothing you could say or do can hurt more than what I've already gone through.*

*My parents, when interviewed during my trial, they said horrible things about me.*

*My husband...he said all the right things that you would expect a pastor to say.*

*I'm sure he loved his time in the spotlight, he soaked it up, vilifying me as he was the sainted pastor who lost his beloved child.*

*I never spoke up about him. Never told my side of the story...did you know that? Of course, you did. That's why you're here, isn't it, taking this confession?*

*Daniel...he came to see me before I was sentenced to here. He had this smug look on his face, telling me he forgave me for what I did, not because he wanted to, but because it's what God told him to do.*

*His parting words were that I was the one possessed and cast out from beneath God's hand, that I deserved everything coming to me, including Hell.*

*One day, I had a visitor. I don't remember her name, but she was doing a paper for school based on the psychological similarities between mothers who drowned their children. I told her about Daniel.*

*I shared every little detail, the good, the bad, and the extremely ugly.*

*She believed me when I told her he raped me. I can't begin to tell you what that meant to me, to have someone believe me.*

*She dug deeper into the story and found all the children he'd fathered and the women, or should I say teenagers, he'd raped.*

*He ended up in jail, did you know that? He served three years before he was let out.*

*He never took any of the blame for our child. It was all on me.*

*I was vilified during my trial, made out to be a monster. The church I'd attended for years made up the vilest of stories about me too.*

*I'm not a monster, Jack. I'm not.*

*I am a mother who stood up for her son and protected him when no one else would.*

*Can you imagine what would have happened if I'd let him live?*

*I was raising the Antichrist. Do you have any idea the power he would yield once he'd grown into a mature man? It would have been the beginning of the end.*

*I couldn't wear that on my conscience. I couldn't be responsible for the deaths of millions because that's what would have happened.*

*[Jack here: Alyssa is trembling now. Her eyes are round, almost solid in color and the fear on her face is something I rarely see. I shiver. I can't help it.]*

*He's here, Jack. Do you feel him?*

*He's whispering now, his voice like a thousand clashing symbols vibrating over my skin. I can't make out the words, but he's taunting me. I can hear it in his tone. He loves to taunt, tease, and scare me with what my future will be like.*

*Do you know what's going to happen, Jack, when I die?*

*I do. Satan has already told me.*

*While I'll huddle in a corner, curled up in a ball with flames surrounding me, another woman will become pregnant and will give birth to the Antichrist. Another woman will be faced with the same decision - if she's aware of what's happening. What if she's not? What if*

*she has no idea?*

*He'll do things differently this time, I know it. He learned from his mistakes with me, and he won't let this child die.*

*First, he has to wait for me…I can't be alive before he seduces another woman.*

*I've tried, Jack, I've tried to fight death, but there's no stopping it, is there? Whether I'm ready or not, whether I want it to or not, it comes, like a thief in the night.*

*I won't die and go to heaven.*

*I'll die and be sent to Hell, where I deserve.*

*He's laughing. Laughing at how foolish I am, hoping, thinking, it would be otherwise. He's telling me this is what I deserve. This is what happens to those who get in his way. The God I grew up believing saw me and found me wanting. The God I grew up with doesn't care about me. Doesn't love me. He hates me, and Satan is the only one who ever watched over me.*

*What did I do that was so wrong? I loved Peter Jacob with all my heart, but that thing I killed… wasn't my son. I should have done more. I should have stood up for my son more. I should have…*

*[Jack here: Alyssa has stopped talking. Her mouth gapes open, eyes wide and watery, and her body shakes with uncontrollable fear. It's palpable. I reach out to place a hand on her arm, wanting to give her comfort, and her skin is burning like it's on fire, and I jerk away. I push myself to my feet, but then the monitors illicit their warning bells. Alyssa is gone.]*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

JACK

Alyssa died at three in the morning.

I'm conflicted, I'm not going to lie. The woman was obviously in pain, had been in pain for so many years.

It's sad to me that no one ever saw it, that no one ever recognized just how badly she needed help. It's also not surprising.

At the time when she grew up, in the area of our country that she was raised, in the deeply routed religious sector…it doesn't surprise me that mental illness was something to be considered evil, a form of possession and not something to be discussed, especially if she was a pastor's wife.

The poor woman.

I don't judge her. I don't condemn her. How can I? She's already been judged, condemned, and now she's dead.

# ASHER SMITH

PATIENT 962

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS
OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

# CHAPTER ONE

Halloween. Probably my favorite time of the year.

As a child, we love it for the decorating and all that candy.

As an adult, I love it for the costumes, candy, and all the movies. Come on, there's nothing better than sitting my ass down on the couch with a beer in hand and pizza on the coffee table and rewatching all the scary movies on tv.

Ike and I have a contest - to see who can watch the most from our list. We produce one every year, making sure to add at least five new movies we haven't seen before. Every shift for the month of October, we talk about what we watched before coming in, dissect the scary bits, and generally mock all the actors.

My all-time favorite Halloween movie is the original 1978 Halloween. In my opinion, and millions of others, by the way, it's the best in the franchise, and every single scary movie since then is based on the original.

If you want to disagree with me - don't tell me.

Ike prefers Friday the Thirteenth. Why I don't know, but each their own, I guess.

There's really no comparison between Mike Myers and Jason, is there?

So, why am I mentioning Halloween?

This next patient...it's what he's known for. He's no Mike Myers or anything, but he's just as bad.

This patient is called The Candyman.

Three guesses why, and I bet you get it on the first try.

It won't take a genius to put two and two together. Halloween

plus candy equals every parent's nightmare.

In this case, it's all true.

Yeah, I'll bet you are telling me that the whole putting poison in candy is a myth - trust me, I've heard it. It's a scare tactic parents use with their kids so they can take all the best candy or stop their kids from eating too much in one night...but what if it wasn't a myth?

While there's no real boogeyman in the little towns of America poisoning children, there was a monster who took this myth and made it a reality.

Every myth has a nugget of truth to it. You realize that, right?

I'll be honest with you - taking his confession was not something I wanted to do. I mean...who wants to hear from someone who poisoned children? There's been some noise though, from one guard to an orderly to someone else and then to the Warden, that he's got something to confess, but he'll only say it to me.

Fuck me a new one. Of course, Warden wants me to take this confession. If there's some new info, he'll share this with the powers that be and earn himself another notch or two. We all know how this game works by now, right?

I've made it very clear I don't want to speak to this patient.

By now, I know some of you through my Patreon page, and I can almost see you opening a new tab on your phone or computer and googling The Candyman, right?

No, the movie is not about him. He's not the inspiration behind a ghost story or anything spooky in the night.

He's a real-life monster, and don't you forget that.

# CHAPTER TWO

JACK

My phone rings and of course I already know who it is.

"Warden." I don't bother saying hello.

I don't bother with any other type of pleasantries because, let's be honest - I'm a little pissed that I'm being forced to hear a confession I want nothing to do with.

Sure, call me a Jackass. I don't care. This asshole should die a painful, slow death, and I don't care what that makes me sound like.

"Asher Smith is coming your way. Are you ready for him?"

If you think I'm rolling my eyes right about now, you'd be right.

"The room is already prepped." My words are clipped and to the point.

"He's got information we want," Warden says as if I don't already know. "Play nice, and I'll make it worth your while."

My ears perk up at this little offer. "What kind of information do you think hasn't come out yet? We all know his story. He sang like a fucking canary during his trial."

"Apparently, he's not the original Candyman. He's willing to give up the name of the one who masterminded the whole thing."

"Bullshit." That came out a hell of a lot faster than anticipated, but it's true nonetheless. Asher Smith is smart. Smart enough to have done exactly what he confessed to doing, and I refuse to buy this bullshit that someone else came up with the idea.

"I think you've made your feelings about Mr. Smith more than

clear. I still want you to offer him his deal. I'll come and oversee you if that's what is needed."

That caught me off guard and stopped the flow of words that were about to pour out my mouth.

I've never had the Warden oversee anything before. Plausible deniability. If asked, he knows nothing about my deals, who I've offered them to, and what not - even though we all know he's one hundred percent aware of every single confession I've taken.

"That won't be necessary."

"Good. Don't let him play with you. Make it clear who is in control. But I want that confession, and I'll be waiting for your phone call to give me a name."

This has me leaning back in my chair and rocking back and forth a little.

"You know these can take hours? Right? I don't fucking keep a schedule for when a confession begins or ends."

"You heard me."

The click as he hangs up is loud in my ear.

Fuuuuucccckkkk.

I kick the trash can in my office, throwing it clear against my office door. It doesn't take long for Ike to knock and nudge the door open a little.

"Everything okay in here?"

One look at my face must confirm that no, not everything is okay.

We both hear the ding of the elevator at the same time.

"Guess The Candyman is here, huh? Want me to take care of him?"

I nod. "Knock him out while you're at it. Hell, make it impossible for me to talk with him at all."

His brows rise a mile high. "You serious?"

I drop my head back and groan. "Yes. I wish. No." I pull open my bottle drawer and pull out a bottle of Jim Bean Bourbon.

"Wow, okay then." Ike steps in and closes the door behind him.

"Hope you're going to pour me one too."

I proceed to take out two shot glasses and pour the elixir. I drain mine and pour another.

"Pour some in your water bottle and take it in with you," Ike says.

I like his idea. I gave him my bottle, which he then takes to the kitchen area and drains. When he comes back, I pour a fair amount into the canister and close it tight.

"This one is going to hurt," I admit.

"Do you have to?"

I wait a few seconds before answering. "Yep."

Ike finishes the shot then opens the door. "Guess I better get him ready."

You know, if there has ever been a time that I'm thankful to work with my best friend, it's now. I don't even have to say how I'm feeling, and he gets it.

That's the beauty of men and their friends. We don't need to go all in-depth with our feelings, express our emotions or other shit. Cause we get it. Plain and simple.

# CHAPTER THREE

JACK

Asher Smith is an asshole.

He's the man next door who could be your drinking buddy or help lend a hand when hanging Christmas lights.

He's the guy who brings the good sausage to the barbecue and doesn't offer to grill them, understanding the sacredness of a man's grill.

He's the guy who would kick the ball with your kid, throw a stick for the dog, all while you take a phone call for work.

Asher Smith could very well be your best friend, and everyone in the fucking Asylum likes him.

Except me.

He's cagey. Holds his cards tight to his chest. Is in it for himself, every single time. He may win the team player of the year award, but it's only because there's a monetary prize attached.

He's also most voted for stabbing you in the back with the sharpest knife on the block.

Why people like him, I can't understand, and yet, like him, they do.

It always amazed me he wasn't able to con the jury who sent him here.

The fucking asshole killed his own kids.

Read that again, will you?

He killed his own children. Not just his, but he convinced three others to do the same thing.

Think you're still going to like him?

I'm sharing his confession for one reason. I want his legacy to be one that doesn't remember his charming smile or the way he broke down after admitting to what he did. I want you to remember him for being the asshole who killed his children for one single reason.

Now - I want to be upfront. He is not the same asshole who poisoned his children and was convicted in 1974 and then died in 1984 by lethal injection. You're going to google and try to figure out who this is and think you found him.

You didn't.

Can you find out more about Asher? Sure, it took me a bit, but I was able to find his information. It won't be easy for you, though. Interested in finding out why?

He's from a small, nothing town in the middle of nowhere, and this never made the news. Well, it made the news, but the small-town news. Our country was in the middle of a terrorist crisis when it happened, so one man killing his own children wasn't top media priority, you know what I mean?

Looking at him, you know he's sick. He's got stage four colon cancer which has spread. His eyes are yellow with jaundice. His hands and feet resemble swollen balloons. The only source of nutrients he's receiving is via the IV.

He could have days left or just hours.

I would prefer if it's just minutes, but you probably already figured that out.

He's got this stench about him that doesn't make me want to sit anywhere near him, so when I enter his room, I pull my chair to the end of the bed, making it clear I don't want to be any closer.

He watches me with this knowledge I'm not his favorite person.

Well, fuck him. Serves him right I'll the last face he sees.

# CHAPTER FOUR

ASHER TO JACK

*Nice to see you, Jack. I've heard about you, but I think this is the first time we're actually meeting.*

*And...I get the feeling you don't much like me. Wow, you know your face shows everything, right?*

*Ike, that nurse from earlier mentioned I shouldn't expect much small talk from you. I guess he wasn't kidding, was he?*

*Did you place me in this room for a specific purpose? Is that a bloodstain over in the corner or just dried shit?*

*I wasn't expecting a five-star death facility, but my own cell looked cleaner than this room.*

*Oh, the silent type. Who should I complain to then, about the lack of cleaning on this floor? Don't think I didn't notice the smears all over the walls. You really should look at your ceilings, too, especially in that hall out there. There are a few places that could use some elbow grease and a solid paint job.*

*Fine. Whatever. I don't have time for this. Listen, I'll just come out with it: I heard you have this type of deal where you'll make my end painless in exchange for a token of truth. A confession, right?*

*I have something I've never told anyone else.*

*I'm hoping that's why you're here?*

*I was set up, Jack. I swear. I'm sure you hear that a lot, but I'm one hundred percent being honest about this.*

*I was set up to be the fall guy, and the only reason I haven't said anything until now is because someone's life was at stake.*

*No, not mine.*
*I could care less about my own life anymore.*
*You've prejudged me, haven't you?*

# CHAPTER FIVE

ASHER

Do you remember the days of online forums?

I have no idea what it's like now - I'm not allowed on a computer so going online is prohibitive for me. Back then, these forums were havens for people like me. You could find anything - any type of interest group - and find a home.

My wife was the one who got me started.

She'd found this new mom group that traded baby items, clothes, toys etc. She'd made continual trips to the post office, dropping packages off of clothes or stuff she'd sold, and we'd have numerous deliveries to our door for things she'd bought.

We had three kids, so we had a lot of stuff.

From that group, she'd found another similar group and made some solid friendships, so much so that she started going on road trips to meet up with some of the ladies.

I got the idea from her. I found a few groups that were interested in the same things I was - golfing and cars. It was crazy the kind of groups on there - there was something for everyone, didn't matter what you were into.

Somehow I got invited to this dad group, we didn't buy or sell anything, but we chatted about life, what it was like raising kids.

The things we discussed, it was crazy. It was nice to find similar people with the same questions as me: how do you balance life and family, how to keep the spark alive with your wife when all she does is focus on the kids, was it wrong not to feel guilty about

putting work first when that was what paid the bills, fed the kids and provided my wife with money to buy all her clothes and shoes and such stuff?

From there, I met others like me, step-fathers, with even more concerns, and it wasn't long until I was invited to a private group.

This group became my haven.

I'd log in in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, during my lunch hour, sometimes even before I left for work to see if there were any new messages.

Haven. Lifeline. Call it what you will, but these men in this group became my closest friends.

No, I'd never seen their real faces, no, we'd never met up in person, but I felt like these men knew me, and I knew them.

We were able to be our authentic selves. That's a rare experience.

Being a step-father to three young children, it wasn't easy.

I never wanted children, and when I'd first met Annabeth, I had no idea she had kids. Her boyfriend left her, the kids' real father, deciding the responsibility was too much for him, and you know what? I got it.

I really did.

I met Beth at a bar just around the corner from where I lived.

She was gorgeous, with a great body and amazing moves on the dance floor. We hit it off, and she came back to my place that night. She was as good in bed as she was at the bar, and I knew right then I'd be a fool to let her slip away.

When I found out she was from out of town and wasn't looking for anything serious, just wanted a good time, I was in heaven - I mean, could it really get any better than that?

When we first started dating, life was amazing. I had the best of both worlds. I had a great apartment in the middle of downtown, close to my job and bars, and then I had this girlfriend who lived out of town, who was perfect and everything I thought I wanted in a wife.

I fell in love with her hard and fast.

I only ever saw her on the weekends. She told me some sob story about living with her parents and having to take care of them since they were older. I didn't mind. I worked in sales, and life during the week was crazy.

Let me make something clear - I was honest with her from day one.

I told her I didn't want to be a father.

I'd been raised in a dysfunctional house where my father was an abusive drunk and, and my mom was a shell of a woman. If that was what family life was like, I wanted nothing to do with it.

I wanted a life without kids. I didn't need that white picket fence, dog running around in the back, cutting grass on the weekend, and going to kids' ball games every Saturday afternoon.

I wanted a carefree life where we could travel to exotic destinations and lounge on the golden sand. I wanted fun at the bars. Tickets to the games. Dinners out at dynamic restaurants. I wanted my picture taken for the newspaper with a gorgeous woman at my side. I wanted money in my bank account, suits that dripped expensively, and a drink cart to be envied.

She knew that.

Let me be very clear about that: She knew and even agreed to it. Said she wanted the same life. She wanted to move to the city and finally experience life. She said she would rather be an auntie to her best friend's brats than birth her own. She said she was all for forgoing stress-filled years with kids and exchanging that for adventure.

She said a lot of things, all the right things, and honestly, I thought I'd found my soul mate.

Our life was great.

There came the point where I wanted more, and I tried to get her to move to the city, or at least come and visit more often. She couldn't leave her parents, though, despite me even offering to find her help.

There were a lot of red flags.

I should have noticed them better, or at least, I should have paid attention to them and to my friends who told me I was falling too fast for someone I barely knew.

It wasn't until after I proposed that she finally came clean about her life.

She waited until then to tell me she already had three small children, all under the ages of six. She lived at home with her parents, but they weren't aging; they were just helping her take care of her kids.

Children. How did I not see that? Sure, she had stretch marks, but she blamed that on weight fluctuations when I noticed the marks at first.

She lied to me. Begged me to forgive her and to give her a chance, to give her kids a chance.

I wasn't parenting material. I'm not afraid to admit that. I never wanted to be a father, and the idea of parenting three...that was a deal-breaker for me.

I should have walked away. God, I wish I had. Really, I do.

I loved Beth, though.

I took some time to think about it. She invited me to come and meet her kids, so reluctantly we met at a playground.

Me. At a playground. If my buddies at work had seen me, they would have laughed their asses off.

Kids are kids, though, right? They're all the same, especially at those ages. Two boys and one girl. We eyed each other with wariness, and then with a shrug, they went to play while Beth and I sat on a bench and talked about what her lies had done to our future.

I almost walked away for good.

It wouldn't have been an asshole move because she knew I didn't want children from the very beginning.

I didn't walk away, though. Something stopped me.

I thought about what life would be like without her in it, and I

figured I could handle fifteen or sixteen years of putting down roots if it meant a lifetime with her.

Yeah, I was that in love with her.

I decided if I was all in, then I'd be all in.

I gave up my life in the city and moved to her puny little town, left my high-paying sales job, and went to work as a car salesman. It didn't take long for me to move up to the manager position. We bought a cute little house with that peeling white picket fence, and yes, we even adopted a dog.

Talk about adjustment. Man, you have no idea the shock that came with that once things set in.

I think it was the first night in the house with the kids, when I stood in the shower and realized the mistake I'd made.

I mentioned there were three kids under the age of six, right?

Do you have any idea what that sounds like?

Especially to a man used to silence at night?

If one kid wasn't crying, the other was screaming.

If one wasn't screaming, then Beth was yelling at one or all of them for some insane reason.

There was no silence in my life from the moment I walked into that house, unless I sat in my vehicle with the radio turned off.

In the car industry, you hear about sticker shock. Well, my whole life was in shock, and the only one to blame was myself.

My life was now centered around being domesticated. Going to work was a sense of relief, being with guys who all needed to let loose and understood stress. Some nights, I'd tell Beth I was working late when really I was just at the bar dreading going home.

Eventually, I accepted reality. After Beth's father sat me down and reminded me the kids needed a father figure in their life, I realized I needed to step up and do the work.

So I did.

I decided to utilize the same skills I possessed that propelled me to succeed in sales, with my new family.

I became the best freaking step-father a man could be.

I played barbies with the girl. Tossed the ball with the oldest and pushed the youngest boy on the swings. I started reading bedtime stories and making breakfast on the weekends. I stood by Beth as she disciplined and supported her whenever she looked like she was about to lose it.

I never wanted the kids to call me Dad, that wasn't a role I was ready for, not yet, but we were getting there, you know?

When the oldest joined the town baseball team, I stepped up and offered to help coach it. I mean...you could say it was a dad thing to do, but really, I wanted to make our dealership look good and offered some sponsorship to go with the deal. It was an easy sell. I can't tell you how many vehicles we sold just because of that connection.

Did I use the kids? Yes. Yes, I did. But in the sales industry, you use every single advantage you can, and you squeeze that sucker dry.

Oh, I can see you don't like that comment. Are you going to judge me this whole time, or can you give me a little leeway and maybe listen without making me feel like an ass?

Sure, just don't look at me, and we'll get through this.

The kids...you know, let's make this easy. Boy one is the oldest. Boy two is the youngest. The girl was the middle child. You don't need their names, right?

The head docs downstairs say by not saying their names, I'm disassociating from the life we had and the actions I took. Whatever.

They were never my kids, to begin with.

# CHAPTER SIX

ASHER

Let's go back to those online forum groups.

The step-dad one was a game changer for me, in more ways than anyone knows.

I'll be the first to admit I had no answers when it came to parenting. I left that all up to Beth. I tried to support her, to be the good husband, but man, it was hard.

I knew the first thing I needed to do with those kids was to create some sort of connection. That's what we do in sales if we want a buying customer.

Those kids, though, they knew. They were clever little buggers. I don't know if it was a vibe I threw off, but they knew I had no interest in them.

I'd tell them to do something, they said no.

I'd suggest we do something together, they said no.

I'd try to disciple, and they'd remind me I wasn't their father.

This lack of connection, it was wearing on Beth, which didn't bode well for me.

Our sex life dwindled to almost nothing. I'd suggest weekends away, but she wanted to bring the kids. I'd suggest date nights, but she'd suggest we spend some family time to help with the bonding.

Honestly, I was in this marriage for her, not for the kids, but it wasn't fair of me to throw that in her face since I knew if I wanted her, I had to accept her kids too.

I was in a no-win situation.

If it weren't for that online group, I would have walked away without question.

Are you familiar with those groups and what they were like? Are they even around anymore?

There would be topic themes, and within those themes, you can create posts. There was one for questions, advice, and suggestions - like fun things to do with the kids, one for marriage, and another for self-care. That one was basically finding a workout buddy or golfing strategies or whatnot.

The group was cool. It was a safe place to lose yourself in and build friendships with other men who really understood what you were going through.

Through this group, I realized that I had nothing to feel guilty for when it came to my lack of connection with the kids, that things like this can't be forced, especially when I was duped into becoming an instant father.

I tried. I want you to know that.

There are countless records of me asking for help, seeking recommendations and ideas on how to be what those kids needed. I tried hard never to talk down about Beth because, despite everything, I truly loved her.

Some of the guys in there would be pissed at her because they felt it was unfair to put me in my position, but I quickly nixed that in the butt.

It didn't take long for people to realize I really did love Beth.

In fact, when it came to marriage advice, on how to keep the romance going, their wives or partners complaining because that spark wasn't there, they would start coming to me for ideas and suggestions.

I created real friendships in that group. People who would help bury a body if needed, you know what I mean?

I'm sure you have friends like that, friends who will back you up, hold you accountable, listen and keep your secrets? If you don't, I recommend you find someone like that. They're important,

Jack. Important to your mental health, in case you weren't aware.

Oh, you roll your eyes. Good to know I can elicit some sort of response from you.

Listen. I know what's been said, I know how this group became vilified during my trial, and I feel horrible that they were forced to shut down. Although, between you and me, I have no doubt most of those men found their way to another group. Not the ones that were my closest friends...they ended up in jail too, from what my lawyer told me. I was the first, they followed shortly after, but they weren't sent here, which was too bad.

The group, though, wasn't evil or bad or a place for bad fathers to get together and figure out how to get rid of their kids.

Think of it like a dart club or a golf game. A bunch of friends who got together and talked shit. They'd bare their soul for a few moments before finding something else to joke about. Sure, there were a lot of jokes and graphics about stupid stuff, but there was nothing ever serious about them, you know?

It was a way to blow off steam. To vent frustrations. To say how you're truly feeling without feeling bad about admitting it.

We hid behind them, sure.

And yes, I posted a few jokes here and there. Usually, when I did, I was frustrated as hell over something that was out of my control, like taking the kids to the store because I needed to pick up shit, and they'd throw some sort of temper tantrum.

I have no idea what life is like now for parents. Still, I once spanked the shit out of the youngest once for throwing a tantrum over not getting a chocolate bar.

Instead of the kid being the one in trouble, I got screamed at by some shit-faced housewife who was too nosey for her own good.

My wife, she was embarrassed by my actions - not her kids, but mine. Can you believe that?

The guys in that group, they understood exactly what I was feeling. They got where I came from, and a few of them had been in my shoes too.

Through them, I learned that the best thing to do was to leave everything in my shopping cart, pick up the kid, and take him out of the store. No arguing. No threatening. No bribing. Just firm, decisive actions that wouldn't have others screaming about me for abuse.

Not like it happened again, you can be sure of that. Beth and I got into quite the fight with the kids present, which I later realized was a big no in all the fucking parenting handbooks.

I refused to run any more errands with kids who couldn't behave in public.

Some men are cut out to be fathers. They really are. It's like it's in their DNA or something. But not me. I never had the right father figure to learn from, nor did I ever have any tendency to really learn.

I tried. My lawyer was able to show plenty of instances where I truly tried. But it was never enough.

Just like some men are born with the gene to kill, others are born without the capability to father children. I didn't say they couldn't produce children, I said father. There's a difference.

Why is that so evil?

You don't have kids, right? I think I heard that somewhere. Do you want any?

I'll take from your silence that you don't.

See? Is it wrong? Does that make us evil? Fuck no. It means we're being honest with ourselves and those around us.

There was a reason I didn't want to be a father. A leopard can't change its spots no matter how hard they try or what kind of costume they put on to pretend otherwise.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

ASHER TO JACK

*This silent treatment from you is really getting tiresome, Jack.*

*Can't you work with me here? I mean, I'm pouring my heart out to you, about to give you a huge catch, and you're not keeping your feelings toward me much of a secret. That's kind of rude, don't you think?*

*I'm not doing this for myself. You do realize that, right?*

*If I were, I would have done it a long time ago. Even before coming here, because maybe then I wouldn't actually have been placed in here. Coming to this place middle of nowhere, where I'm basically lost within the system...that was by choice.*

*This place has a reputation, you know that, right?*

*Even with that reputation, it's not the worst Asylum out there. My lawyer and I went over the options, and when this one presented itself, I knew I'd be safe here.*

*Yes, safe.*

*You don't think I'm ignorant to what happened to the others, do you? They didn't last long in prison.*

*Men who kill children usually don't.*

*I knew when I got caught if I wanted to live long enough to die a natural death, I needed to be here, in this place.*

*Now, look at me. I'm dying a natural death, for sure. Guess this is what happens when you try to force destiny, isn't it?*

*I can't help but think...if I'd gone to prison like the others, I'd probably be dead by now. Dead, without the pain that I've been living*

*with...which is better, I wonder?*

*I had a lot of misconceptions, that's for sure.*

*I thought Beth would come join me, at least come and see me. We were supposed to be soul mates, that our love was worth everything. She apparently didn't feel the same way.*

*I tried to send her letters, is that in my file? They all came back, unopened. Return to Fucking Sender. That's what was written on it. I thought maybe she moved, but not with that personal message.*

*She just moved on. From me. She made that clear.*

*I stopped writing her, eventually. She was alive, and that's all that mattered, right?*

*I mean...I'm here, took the rap, let everyone give me that god-awful nickname of The Candyman, all for her.*

*See, I'm not that much of an asshole.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ASHER

Beth wanted another child. She thought things might change if I had my own biological child.

Why do women always assume babies fix things? In my opinion, they make everything worse.

First, you have the hormones that we have no idea how to navigate as men, then you have the sleepless nights and postpartum and ridiculous expenses to keep the tiny squealing things fed and clothed.

Having a baby doesn't work miracles. They only cause more problems.

For the longest time, I said no.

No way in hell did I want a child. That would make four. Was she crazy?

That was obviously the wrong thing to say.

Finally, I said I wasn't willing to actively try but would go with the flow and see what happens.

What she didn't know was I had a vasectomy at the age of twenty. But hey, if the idea of trying made her happy, then so be it.

Oh, fuck you. Don't give me that look.

The men in the group, they were supportive. I never told them that I couldn't medically have children because keeping that a secret from the woman I love, well, that would make me look like an ass.

Someone in the group brought up adoption. There was a lot of talk about it, legally making those children your own, but in all honesty, I never thought about taking those steps myself.

I watched man after man do the right thing, legally adopt the children that weren't theirs, giving them their name, putting them on their benefits...all the things a proper father would do.

Funny that I never thought to take those steps myself, right?

One night, Beth caught me reading some posts in the group. She stood right over my shoulder as I typed 'congratulations on making it legal' post.

You know where I'm going with this, right?

She didn't come right out and ask, which surprised me. I was the one to suggest maybe we look into it ourselves.

Holy shit, I wasn't prepared for how happy she was. She flung herself into my arms, and I swear we had the best sex that night that we'd had in ages.

I dragged my feet, of course. I mean...they weren't my kids, but I had a part to play, and if I wanted a happy life, I needed to stay within the script.

You know, within the group, I was honest, but never too honest.

I would share the struggle, ask the questions, try the suggestions, but I never actually came out and said I was unhappy with being the step-dad or that I wish I'd never actually married Beth.

Ask my lawyer, those words, those sentiments, they were never in any of those posts.

Once Beth started focusing on the necessary steps for me to legally adopt her children, she stopped all discussions on having our own baby. Maybe she felt adding another child to the mix wasn't necessary, that by suggesting this step, I was showing more interest, enough at least to appease her.

Fine. Happy wife, happy life, right?

When is it our turn? I mean, when do we men get to be happy?

Do we even matter? Is it any wonder that we spend more time at work, find excuses to not be home? There's a reason why we tend to hide away in garages or fix something on something, right?

Man to man, here, Jack. You agree, you have to.

Anyways, sex started being just for sex, for intimacy, for fun, and not for a possible baby, and man, I gotta tell you, it's a different experience without that stress added in.

Life with kids, man, it's not easy. Why would anyone decide to spend the next twenty years with that stress and multiply it by adding child after child to the mix? Yeah, that's definitely not for me.

I missed our time before marriage, you know? I missed the fun-filled weekends where we would meet up, her looking drop-dead gorgeous, where we'd have breakfast in bed, walk around my apartment naked, watch movies all weekend long. I missed when it was just us, when all we focused on was us.

I think I mentioned this in the forum on some post, it was an off-hand comment where I said I'd give anything to have those days back, that sometimes it's hard to wrap my head around how drastic of a change it was for us.

It was because of that comment that I got invited into a private section of the forum. I had no idea those existed.

Oh, you've no idea the freedom that comes within those secret sections.

It was eye-opening.

Chad was the admin who invited me to this section. He brought in a few of us, saying he felt like there were things in common between the five of us.

We were all men who struggled with the role of step-father.

We were all men duped into a ready-made family.

We'd all expressed similar misgivings about the lives we live - how we love our wives but miss our pre-wedding days.

I appreciated him pulling us all in like that. It was nice to have a group of friends where I didn't need to filter everything, you

know?

Not that we were best friends right off the bat. It took a little bit of hedging and dodging before some form of trust could be built. I mean...a few of us had chatted on our own, but not all of us.

It takes time to build the kind of relationship where you can toss another man a shovel, and he won't ask why.

Chad was great. He carried this charismatic personality and charm that gave me confidence that we could be best buds if we lived closer.

In terms of geography, we were all over the map. One lived up in Alaska, one in Florida, one in Utah, and then there was me.

Chad, I don't think he ever disclosed where he was from. If he did, it never registered with me.

How can I describe Chad?

He's like the best friend you didn't know you needed.

If we'd met in person, he'd be loud and boisterous and one of the gang. He'd be the first to suggest a fun activity and the last to leave a party.

He made sure to make everyone feel included, but did so in a way that wasn't to feelings orientated. Does that make sense?

He told us he had his own practice helping addicts, but between the two of us, I pegged him for a salesman. He didn't have that therapist vibe, you know?

Another thing that connected the five of us was money. More specifically, debt.

I didn't make the money I used to.

At first, it wasn't that big of a deal. I downsized to a small town, so I didn't need the funds for an extravagant life, right?

I didn't expect to be buying a house in a dipshit of a town that needed major renovations or a wife who decided she was happier playing housewife but shopped as if she still worked full time.

Let's not even mention the kids and the cost of putting them into baseball in the summer, hockey in the winter, or gymnastics

and dance year-round.

Kids are klutzy things, and the cost of doctor and hospital visits were ridiculous, even back then. I can't imagine what they would be now.

Don't forget the college funds. Any good parent looked to their kids' future, right? At least, it was expected.

That can bankrupt a man right there, especially with three kids.

We all bitched about the money. Every single one of us knew we fell short when it came to taking care of our family the way we should.

Chad was the one who asked us about insurance. If we had any for ourselves, for our spouses, and for our kids.

Who the hell takes out life insurance on their kids? That's morbid, don't you think? Until you realize just how much a funeral actually costs.

Most of us were in debt over our heads. A few of the guys were in the middle of experiencing bankruptcy which was killing them apparently. Their marriages were suffering, and we all tried to bolster them as best we could.

At the time, we weren't doing too bad financially, but we'd definitely dug ourselves into a debt hole where most of our cards were almost maxed out, and our savings wasn't anything to shout about.

Probably didn't help that we'd just bought a new house, which meant we had to buy new furniture and whatnot.

I looked into our insurance, and each kid was covered for up to five grand for a funeral service. That barely covered the cost. Thanks to Chad, I upped the costs on all three kids.

One of the guys in the group worked in insurance. Sales to sales, I wanted to do him a solid, so I bought extra insurance on all the kids plus Beth and myself. He gave me a killer of a deal, so it was a no-brainer.

I didn't think much about it, you know?

I wanted to make sure Beth was taken care of if something

happened to me, and I wanted to make sure it wouldn't be a struggle for us if something happened to one of the kids.

It's what a parent, especially a father, does, right?

# CHAPTER NINE

ASHER TO JACK

*Get that look off your face.*

*I was doing the responsible thing, Jack. The right thing, as a father.*

*I swear on my mother's grave that my intentions were all good.*

*No, my mother is not still alive.*

*Why won't you believe me?*

*What reason do I have to lie at this point in my life when I can count the minutes to my death?*

*God, you're so cynical, aren't you? What were you like before you came here?*

*I can imagine you were a man with a purpose, wanting to help others. It's why you're in the medical industry, isn't it? So naive. So...pure.*

*Coming here has jaded you. Made you cold, hasn't it?*

*Oh, I'm sorry, it's assholes like me that's made you like this? Wow, I had no idea we knew each other that well.*

*You know, I'm smart. I won't deny that. When I want something in life, I don't let anything hold me back. I've proved that time and time again.*

*I think I've made it clear that Beth was my world. I never thought I'd meet a woman like her, one that I could get lost in, and yet I did. I fell for her hard, and I have no regrets about that.*

*Was it wrong of me to wish for a different life with her?*

*I wasn't the only one, you know. She wished for things to be like they were before too. I can't tell you how many conversations we'd have*

*lying in bed, or sitting out on the back deck once the kids were down, and daydream about when we had all the time in the world before we were married.*

*I gave her a taste of a life she never thought she could have. Didn't mean she was a horrible mother, just a woman who realized just how drastic her life had changed once having kids.*

*She would count down the years till we could go away on weekend trips or take long, sun-filled weeks on a beach.*

*I hated that we had to wait years. Beth's parents were okay with watching the kids for a few hours, maybe even a full day, but they were getting up in age and couldn't handle the kids like they used to.*

*We would play this game...what if.*

*What if we moved to the city?*

*What if we had no debt?*

*What if we moved to a beach destination and found different jobs?*

*What if we had no commitments, no kids to raise...*

*There was always wishful thinking on her part. I could hear it in her voice.*

*Those feelings, it didn't make her a bad mother. It said nothing about the awesome job she'd done raising those kids so far, and all the sacrifices she'd made for them.*

*All it meant was she was a woman who knew she was more than just a mother, but there was nothing she could do about it.*

*Listen, I'm not saying she wanted her children dead. I'm not saying she ever wished that, or ever even uttered the words.*

*She had nothing to do with what happened.*

*But, you can't fault a woman for wanting more with her life.*

# CHAPTER TEN

ASHER

Somehow, that topic came up within the group - the what-if game.

The timing was spot on too.

One evening I found Beth on the computer, and she was looking up houses in Mexico and the Caribbean. I didn't think she was all that serious until she started asking me to look at properties and what did I think we could afford.

We couldn't afford any of them - not with our debt load. Maybe if we sold the house and paid off some of the credit card bills that continued to rise because Beth didn't know how not to spend money...but...

She wouldn't let the idea go. She created this board on the wall of our home office and printed off different places that she liked.

She called it her dream board.

Do you know what it's like, as a man, to know your wife has dreams, and there's nothing you can do to help her see them become a reality? And that the reason you can't help is because of her children?

We've been married long enough that you'd think I connected with the buggers, but no. I tried. I wore a mask every single day I was with them.

Do you have any idea what it's like to have some snot-faced brat yell at you on a regular basis?

They have no problem screaming at you that you aren't their dad, wishing you would die, never been born, and any other

obscenities that if I were to utter...God forbid that ever happens.

They were right. Even though legally they were now mine, I would never be their true father. Not the guy who loved them unconditionally, who wanted them, held them as babies...I would never be that type of father to them.

I knew that. Beth knew that. Her parents knew that. Hell, the kids knew that.

There comes the point where you just give up trying. Why fake what's not there when everyone knows you're not being honest?

This came up. I was beyond frustrated one night when Beth was out with her girlfriends, and all three of the kids were hellions. Nothing I did was right.

Not the pizza I ordered for dinner.

Not the movie I put on.

Not the way I tucked them in.

Certainly not the way I attempted to tell them what to do. So many screaming matches. So many words flung at me, so many I hate you's, you're not our father, I wish you'd never married my mom...

Wrong or not, I agreed with them. I hated them too. They destroyed my life. I wish I'd never decided to be their father. I wish they'd never been born.

All the wrong things to say, but every parent screws up at some point.

I finally went into my office, slammed the door shut, and said the hell with it. If the kids didn't want to go to bed, fuck it. Beth can deal with them in the morning, and I no longer cared.

I went into the group and basically said this.

I also said...I'm playing the what-if game. What if I wasn't their father? I didn't want to lose Beth, but...what if the kids all died? What if they all got sick, or there was an accident or...

Yes. I went there. I said it. I admitted how I felt - finally, and didn't care about the consequences.

I'd thought about deleting my post, but before I could, one

person posted, then another, and another...all agreeing with me, all admitting their own failures, all playing the what-if game with me.

Chad was the one who took it a step further.

What if all this happened? What if the kids got sick and died? Or were in an accident? What then? How would our lives change? What if it all came true...what was our initial gut reaction?

Relief. That was my initial reaction. Relief then happiness. There was even a sense of giddiness. I glanced over at the wall, at Beth's dream houses, and realized if her kids weren't in the equation, we could move there in a heartbeat.

Chad pushed a little further. If it were to happen, how would we do it?

There was a little push back, but Chad, wearing his therapist hat, said that there was nothing wrong with imaging a situation, as long as we never acted on it. That, sometimes in the picturing it, we realize it's not what we wanted after all.

His logic made sense.

We all started throwing ideas around. Car accident, sleeping pills at night, drowning in the bathtub, leaving the kids in a running car with the garage door closed...given the freedom to let our imaginations run wild, that's exactly what we did.

We thought of everything and anything. If the idea was too vanilla, Chad would push us to think deeper, darker, giving us permission to reveal our true selves.

Yeah, it was a little frightening, and some of the things the guys revealed were disturbing.

I mean, one of them suggested dressing up as a killer for Halloween and really creating the perfect movie scene with dead bodies and blood everywhere. But he didn't stop at the kids; he included his wife too.

No way, man. That was going too far, for me at least.

I would never do something to hurt Beth. It was her and I to the end. But the more and more we discussed ways to get rid of the brats, the more I started to realize this was what I truly wanted.

Once all venues of death were exploited, Chad suggested one.
It was simple. To the point. Easy to get away with too.
Halloween was just around the corner.
Why not poison the kids with their own candy?

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

ASHER TO JACK

*It was brilliant, really. I mean, it's something you hear about every year, an urban myth that grows and grows until it becomes every parent's nightmare.*

*Every year at Halloween, you hear words of caution on the news and in the paper. I mean, so many warnings of what to look out for without any hard evidence that it has actually happened.*

*Tell me, Jack, how many deaths occur at Halloween? I'm talking about children who die from eating poisoned candy?*

*Can you count on one hand the number, taking me out of the equation?*

*Probably not, right?*

*The media has done such a great job at creating a fear that has never been needed.*

*Someone injecting poison into apples or pushing knife blades into the skin, thinking no one would notice? Like, come on.*

*Parents are the most diligent in protecting their kids, especially from dangerous strangers and imagined nightmares.*

*The first Halloween with Beth's kids was an eye-opener.*

*She'd let the kids eat treats from neighbors she knew, and the rest went in the container. Back at the house, it would all be tossed on the table where Beth would go through and throw out anything that looked suspicious.*

*I kept that in the back of my mind as we started throwing out possible ideas on how we would poison the candy.*

*It couldn't be too obvious. No pinpricks that someone might notice, or anything that would be an after taste either.*

*Someone brought up how dried apple seeds, ground up, create cyanide, but then the question of how many seeds and how to disguise the powder stopped that line of thought fast.*

*Another mentioned injecting cyanide into chocolate bars. Since cyanide has no taste and most chocolate bars are full of tiny bubbles, this seemed like a simple solution.*

*We had fun running through different scenarios, discussing the type of candy to use, how we would do it.*

*By the time we were done, Chad asked us how we all felt.*

*There wasn't a single one of us who said we were ready to murder our step-kids.*

*We were all in good moods, had a great laugh, then went on to talk about what Halloween movies to watch and which ones we should introduce our kids to.*

*I signed off after that. There was no way Beth was letting me watch horror movies with the kids.*

*You know, I remember going to bed that night with a smile on my face. Regardless of how the kids acted or how angry I'd felt earlier, thanks to Chad, by the time I went to bed, I was only mildly exasperated with the kids.*

*Guess Chad knew what he was doing, after all. Still wasn't sold on him being a therapist, but hey, anything was possible, right?*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

ASHER

I had so many follow-up conversations with Chad after that.

I appreciated him checking in on me, you know? Made me feel special - at first. Then I started to worry that he noticed something he was concerned about. I'd ask him, and he'd tell me all was fine.

I never really thought anything of it. I'll be honest.

It was maybe a week after that thread about how we'd poison our step-kids that I noticed all the messages disappeared.

When I brought it up, Chad said he did that as a 'precaution. He wanted to protect us, in case, you know, anything did happen.

Nice guy, right? Yeah, you'd think so. Just looking out for the guys he brought into his special little club, because that's how it was starting to feel.

I didn't really participate in the general threads anymore.

Sometimes I'd offer a suggestion here or there, but for the most part, the majority of my involvement was in our private group chat.

I felt safe there. Protected. Like I could say anything and everything without any type of judgment.

At the time, I didn't notice or think it was intentional, at least, but the general feel of the group started to change.

We'd stopped asking for help or suggestions. We gripped and complained and started talking about exit strategies.

The sad part, the majority of us in that small group loved our wives, but it was the pressure and burden of being fathers that we

couldn't take anymore.

I know I felt that way.

I'd tried. It's not like I surprised my family with a puppy for Christmas, only to realize we couldn't handle the responsibilities of being pet owners. I spent years in a marriage that I wanted, that I loved, because of the woman I'd married.

It was the kids I didn't want.

Some people just don't carry that parenting gene. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with them or that they are evil people. It just means they're being honest with themselves and those around them.

I never wanted kids - as I've said.

That didn't change after being married for a few years, either.

Chad asked us what we were prepared to do about it then.

I thought that meant he was tired of listening to us bitch and complain about our lives. But he didn't let up.

He said if we didn't like how our lives were right now, what were we willing to do to change it?

None of us wanted to get a divorce. More and more, though, we were starting to think that was the only way. I mean...the kids were still too young to start dreaming of the days when they were in high school and rarely home, or even in college, and we had some freedom.

Was I willing to put in the ten or so years for that to happen?

I'd do a lifetime with Beth.

I didn't want to do a lifetime with her kids.

The closer it got to Halloween, the more a few of us started rehashing the idea of what if.

No one came right out and said anything, not in public, at least.

Chad had my email, and we started chatting via that means. Why, I'm not sure, since we could chat in private within the group, but, again, something I didn't think anything of at the time.

I had a private email that I used for...well, it's what I used when I didn't want Beth to find out anything, let's say that.

I didn't keep the login on my computer or have it written down anywhere, so there was no way she could have known I had it. You know what I'm talking about, right?

Everyone has a private email they use. Don't tell me you don't. I had a few. I have none now, for obvious reasons. I mean...why would I need one if I can't even get use of a computer?

I appreciated Chad. At this point, I had no problem calling him a friend.

I trusted him. I think that goes without saying.

We started chatting about dream goals, what we would do, where we would go if the issue was no longer a problem.

I didn't realize it then, but we'd stopped saying kids or children and started referring to them as the issue or problem.

Desensitizing maybe?

No, there was no maybe about it. That's precisely what Chad was doing.

I started adding my own places that I could see Beth and I moving to, upon the dream board. Our evenings were filled with lists and ideas and looking at things online - and I took all of that as Beth's indication she was all in on the plan that was slowly starting to form.

You know what they say about assuming, right? Makes an ass out of you and me.

That was one of many mistakes. I'm not ashamed to admit that.

Halloween rolls around. It's on a Friday, so that meant a fun day for the kids at school. They all dressed up in costumes that cost way too much money, ate way too many candies, and became way too hyper.

It was crazy the junk they brought home. Each kid had their backpack full of small bags of chips, suckers, and goodie bags I'm sure the teachers had put together.

In all honesty, those were my favorite ones because they were full of sour candy, gummy worms, Swedish berries...all the good gummy stuff.

Until that point, I wasn't one hundred percent sure I would go through with my plan, you know?

I mean, I had all the materials, and I knew what I would do and how to do it if I was going to do it at all. I wasn't sure if I would, and that was the real question.

Would I?

The situation had to present itself.

Have you ever done Halloween with kids? It's crazy and chaotic and quite honestly has to appeal to every man's inner child.

I dressed up as a vampire - complete with the fake teeth and blood dripping down my face. The kids...they were ghosts, a football player and a princess.

Beth, she dressed up as a princess, just like the girl. Beth was gorgeous, the girl cute.

We went out as a family, standing down on the walkway while the kids climbed stops and rang doorbells.

Trick or treat, they'd call out.

We waved at everyone we saw. Gushed over all the cute costumes, even agreed to meet up later in the backyard with a few other parents and some beer.

It was a good night.

The kids were...kids. Hyper. Ornery. Threw tantrums. None of them wanted to have a bath, all of them wanted their treats, but Beth put down her foot and said no candy until after the bath.

While she made sure the kids were all clean, I made sure the candy was all safe.

That's when I saw the small goodie bags of sour candies. Each kid had at least a bag or two, and I knew these treats would be a hit with the kids.

Every time we were at the store, all they begged for was sour candy.

Beth had put the candy they got from school up on a shelf. I took those bags down and opened them up, and placed all those gummy treats into a bowl, leaving them on the center of the table.

The bags they'd got tonight, I added most of the stuff into that dish too.

I tossed the bags in the garbage and then went through all the rest of the candy. The caramel apples were placed to the side. The bags of chips to another. The chocolates all piled into a heap and then the other candy in another pile.

I knew Beth would want to look through everything, just like I knew she would toss out what few candy apples we had. She didn't trust those. Apparently, they were constantly featured on the news as unsafe, full of razor blades or needles.

It didn't take long for the sound of barrelling feet to parade down the stairs. One by one, they took their seats and started going through their treats, picking out the ones they liked and placing them in their own treat baskets Beth had bought for them.

While they did this, they started mowing down on the candy dish. By the time Beth and the girl made it to the table, almost no candy was left.

I made sure to save her some; I didn't want to hear her screaming over how it wasn't fair that she didn't get any.

By the time they all went to bed, it was like they were in a sugar coma. They definitely had way too much sugar. They were wired and tripping over their feet, one complaining of a headache, the other saying she didn't feel so good...so while Beth sat on the couch and looked for a horror movie, I put the kids to bed.

Of course, none of them felt good; they'd eaten way too much sugar right before bed. I told them I didn't want to hear a peep from them, I didn't care what the reason or I would take all their candy with me to work in the morning.

Didn't hear a peep all night. Guess my threat worked.

I spent the rest of the night on the couch with my sweetheart, my arms around her while she clutched at my hands during all the scary bits.

It was perfect. It was heaven. We even had amazing sex on the couch.

I tidied up while she went upstairs to get ready for bed. She always took so long in the bathroom with washing her face and putting lotion on her body.

It didn't take long before the screaming started.

I dropped everything and raced up the stairs. One look at all three kids and I ran back down the stairs and called the police for help.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ASHER TO JACK

*You know the rest of the story, right Jack?*

*At least, what's been said in the news.*

*All three kids died.*

*While we watched a movie and had sex, Beth's children died from an insulin overdose.*

*No, no one in our family was diabetic, but you know that already.*

*I took the insulin from a co-worker over a period of a few months. They never had any idea their medication wasn't lost: it was stolen.*

*I thought I'd gotten away with it.*

*I was the grieving step-father, just wanting to comfort my wife during this loss. She was inconsolable, as was to be expected.*

*Chad was a great friend during this time.*

*I couldn't go into the forum, well, it wasn't that I couldn't, but Chad advised that I stay away. He shared the news and forwarded all the condolences.*

*Things were fine for a short time. No one looked at me, not until after the police had done their due diligence and talked with all our neighbors and teachers.*

*Of course, I inquired about the insurance money; we had three funerals to pay for.*

*Even though there was a loud uproar in the community about three children dying and the fear of poisoned candy, when no other child got sick, of course, the focus was placed on Beth and me.*

*Me, more than Beth.*

*The police were nice, at first. That didn't last long.*

*I was warned to stay home, to find a lawyer. I knew most of the cops in town, so there was some sort of trust built up.*

*Beth didn't want to believe I'd done anything wrong, and I maintained I never had.*

*Then I got a phone call.*

*It was Chad.*

*He suggested I take the fall, admit what I'd done if I wanted Beth to remain safe.*

*He held over my head all our private messages inside the forum, the emails that went back and forth, and even the forum discussion he'd told everyone he'd deleted.*

*Turns out he was a liar. He'd printed hard copies.*

*Those were damaging. They were also used as evidence. No one knew about the secret email where I'd shared exactly what I'd done with him or how he'd helped me perfect the plan.*

*That - he held over my head.*

*All of us, the small group Chad had groomed to kill their step-children, were all caught and sentenced.*

*We'd all poisoned the candy, each with different methods, methods Chad all helped us to think of.*

*They blamed me for being the mastermind. Can you believe that?*

*I know they questioned Chad. Turns out he really was a therapist.*

*A dishonest, conniving therapist who forged documents with all our signatures, documents that stated we were his patients in some sort of group therapy. He claims he never believed we'd follow through with anything. Can you believe that?*

*I call bullshit.*

*Did you know those documents were faked? I swore up and down I never signed it, but, of course, that was never proven.*

*I don't know how he got my signature, how he got any of ours, but he did and somehow forged it.*

*What's that? Sure, we sent out Christmas ca....rds. Well shit. Yeah, the first year in that group, he'd asked everyone for a Christmas card.*

*Of course, Beth wanted to send him one back because that's what you do. And, of course, I signed my name.*

*Damn.*

*Chad, the ass, threatened my wife's safety.*

*I fully believed him too.*

*If he could orchestrate a handful of men to all kill their step-children during Halloween, then I'm sure he'd figure out a way to kill my wife too.*

*So I took the fall.*

*I came here.*

*My wife wanted nothing to do with me after everything came out.*

*A lawyer showed up one day with divorce papers I needed to sign. I refused unless I could speak to her - something I had yet to do after getting arrested - but she made a vow never to speak to me again and kept it.*

*Regrets ... I have all of them. The thing is, regrets mean nothing in the long run.*

*Sure, I've regretted what I did. Hell, I regret many of the things I did, but since I can't do anything about any of those regrets, why live with them hanging over me?*

*So...now that you know my big secret, what will you do with it?*

*Wonder if Chad is still alive?*

*Guess it won't matter much what happens now, will it? I'm going to go soon, right?*

*Thank you, Jack. Has anyone said that before to you? I see that big needle, and I don't feel anything but thankfulness that this life is about to be over.*

*I'll finally be free.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JACK

If I hadn't already plunged the morphine into the IV bag, I'd have stopped with those last words.

The asshole didn't deserve to be free. He deserved a life of misery, of pain, and I hated being the one to take that away from him.

Fuck the Warden. Fuck Asher. Fuck that Chad.

You know, my feelings toward Asher hadn't changed, not even with listening to his confession. Regardless of whether he loved his wife or not, he never should have gone through with the marriage if he knew he never wanted to be a father.

I left his room in a foul mood, that's for sure.

My shift was over, so I headed to the bar and sat on a corner stool. It took a while for my mood to lift enough to talk to someone without biting off their head.

The thought of stopping the confessions was something I'd toyed with, thanks to this asshole.

I was forced into something I hadn't wanted to do, and I'd been right not to want to do it.

I should have listened to my gut.

The ass was still guilty. It wasn't like he was a victim in any of this.

The secret he revealed? It was a waste of my time.

If you're wondering what I did with his confession, don't bother. I gave it to the Warden, just like he told me to.

I also told him if he ever forced me to take another confession I didn't want to do, that would be the last one he ever got from me.

I think he realized just how pissed I was. Good.

Wondering about Chad? He got his just desserts.

Turns out Chad was already in prison for murdering his own wife and step-children. By the time you're reading this, he's already dead, but not by my hand.

# ADAM

PATIENT 922

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS
OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

# CHAPTER ONE

Cults. There's a vibe you get with the word, isn't there?

To me, there is. I think of a commune of people living off the grid, and everything is old school.

Or there's that one sex cult that's been all over the news lately, too. I wonder if we'll ever get someone in here from there…I'd be interested in their story.

We get all sorts in the Asylum, as I'm sure you can imagine.

Like Adam.

His story is quite interesting. He was born into a cult, so he basically had no other option than to live it, you know? He also claims to have been in a laboratory...personally, I think he's screwing with us, but...well, you can decide that for yourself.

Regardless of how he was born or raised, it still doesn't make him innocent or excuse what he did, even if he was brainwashed.

But rather than me explain it to you - I think it's better to read it in his own words.

# CHAPTER TWO

JACK

It's mid-week, and I'm on day three of my four-day shift.

Basically, what I'm getting at is I'm tired and done with all the bullshit that goes on in this place.

During the weekly staff meeting, Warden seemed to be on a quest, one that involved having a stick so far up his ass he might as well call himself God, if you know what I mean.

The Board of Directors are coming for a visit, and he wants the place gleaming, from floor to ceiling, including all inmate cells and supply closets.

Who the fuck is going to be peering in my supply closets? Sure as hell isn't some uppity in heels and short skirt, that's for sure.

I made my disgust for this task a little too evident - I basically tossed my notebook down on the table and leaned back in my chair. Warden paused and gave me his *are you done?* look, to which I just rolled my eyes.

So today, regardless of how Warden feels about it, everyone is cleaning their asses off, and no one on my floor is allowed to go down to the other floors to help. They made their own mess, let them clean it up.

I don't know how he expects this place to shine - the stains are too ingrained that they've become part of the place. Sure, the walls are wiped down, the floor is washed, grime is scrubbed away, but there's a level of dirt and disgust that just can't be erased, no matter how much he wants it to be.

Maybe if they gave me some funds for paint and let me hire a local carpenter, I could spruce up the floor. Otherwise…at least we still have plants thriving despite being on the deathward.

So there's that.

I'm in my office, filling out paperwork when I get a phone call from the infirmary.

"Got a guest coming your way."

I recognize Darren, one of the nurses down there.

"Who? I thought you guys were empty?" During the staff meeting, Darren and his crew were proud to point out they had no patients at the moment, and all they've done was clean and complete inventory. Brown nosing suck ups, if you ask me.

"Adam."

"Adam who? What are we playing here, a knock-knock game? I need fucking names, asshole."

Darren has me riled, and he's quite pleased with himself. I can see him sitting at his desk with a shit-ass grin on his face.

"The Adam. The only Adam we have in the Asylum right now, you ass wipe."

Huh. The Adam. He's not that old, early forties, and he's only been here a handful of years. I'm shocked.

"What happened to him?"

I'm picturing in my head an assortment of events that might have occurred downstairs. He got caught in the shower, a gang roll during recess, someone tried to poison his food…

"He got rabbit punched."

That took me a minute to process. Getting rabbit punched is serious business. For those unaware, it's a blow to the back of the head or skull and can lead to permanent spinal cord damage, brain damage, or even death.

We've had a few deaths due to being rabbit punched here. Hit hard enough, and you detach the brain from the stem, and it's lights out.

"What the hell? He's still alive?"

"Barely. That's why he's coming to you. He'll have a guard with him too. Warden deems him to be 'at risk' and wants him to die on his own terms and not someone else. Know what I mean?"

If the Warden is involved, the next call should be coming from him. If Adam is conscious and can talk, he probably wants a confession.

Fuck it. Like I have time for that right now.

"What the fuck happened?"

"Turns out one of the new admits this week was a victim bystander. Waited in line during lunch and went at him. Guess others knew about it cause no one went to help Adam. Poor guy, I kind of liked him."

That doesn't surprise me. Darren likes most people.

"Keep an eye on him, will you? The kid had a long life ahead of him still. This ain't fair, man. Just ain't fair."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say his victim probably felt that way at the time too, but Darren hung up before I had the chance to say it.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the Warden calls.

"You've got a guest coming your way. I want the full maximum treatment and only from you. No one else gets in to see him. You understand?" His voice is stern. Fuck, he's in a mood.

That doesn't excuse him, though, for what he just accused my staff of possibly doing.

"No one on my staff has anything against Adam." The fact he'd suggested otherwise pisses me off.

I don't bother to hide it from my voice either.

"Do. You. Understand?" Warden basically bites off the words.

Oh, he got the message, and he's giving me one back.

He doesn't fucking care if he hurt my feelings.

Fine then.

I got the fucking message.

# CHAPTER THREE

Adam's room is ready. I've also conveyed the message to my staff that any visits to his room is out of bounds.

He's my patient from start to finish.

I'm there as they bring him in, and I offer the guard a fresh cup of coffee I'd just put on to brew.

"Thanks, man."

I read the guard's name badge. Stuart. I don't recognize him, which doesn't say much.

"You're on easy time up here, so go grab a chair and relax." I point toward the end of the hall, where a seat has been left for him.

His eyes light up at the realization of how easy his shift is going to be. I mean...he's standing guard over an inmate that won't be going anywhere any time soon. His only job is to keep everyone but me out of that room.

When I walk through the doorway, I stop and give Adam a good look over.

He's not what I expected him to be.

Honestly, I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this baby face, blond hair kid.

Yeah, I know he's in his late thirties or early forties, but he looks like a twenty-something smart ass with something to prove.

You know what I mean, don't pretend you don't.

He's watching me with old-soul eyes, and I can't help but shiver as I feel he's looking straight through me.

He doesn't say anything.

Neither do I.

I grab his chart and give it a good look through. Turns out Adam is paralyzed from the neck down. Seems that punch did more damage than I'd thought. I'm surprised the kid isn't in a coma, to be honest.

"Guess you pissed off the wrong person," I say.

Now, I know that can come across as cruel, but I made sure to add a little sarcasm to my voice. Adam caught it because he gave me what you'd consider a wiry smile.

"Guess so." His voice is strange. Like it's caught in the middle stages of puberty and can't quite decide if it's going to level up or go deep.

"How's the pain level?" I've noticed him wince a few times since walking into the room. He's wearing a neck brace to help keep him immobilized.

"Manageable. The doctor downstairs told me it won't last long, either way. Says it's a miracle I'm even alive and talking."

I'm surprised, too, to be honest.

"Say the word, and we can discuss pain management, all right? No need to suffer if you don't want to."

"Is that you offering me a deal?"

I feel my brows rise, showing my surprise.

"Someone downstairs mentioned it before I was brought up here. I'm told I just need to sing like a bird. I don't sing."

I shrug. "Guess you don't want my deal then."

I make some notes in his files and make it look like I'm about to leave.

"What do you want to know?" There's a sense of curiosity in his voice. That and a feeling of defeat.

I think that interests me the most. Why is he so defeated? Because he's here? Because he's paralyzed? Because he's not dead?

"The story you haven't told anyone else." If someone told him about my deal, then they should have told him what the terms are.

Adam looks away.

"Think about it. I'll be back."

I don't wait for a reply. I leave, closing the door behind me.

I give a nod to Stuart, who's sitting down with a book on his lap. It's not open yet, but it's a Stephen King one, so he'll be engrossed soon.

I head back to my office and look over all the patient files we have on the floor. There aren't that many, which means I've got time to assign more chores to the staff.

"How's Adam?" I glance up to find Ike standing in the doorway.

"Do you know him?" I ask.

Ike has his arms crossed over his chest. "I've talked with him a few times. He's a bit screwed up, if you ask me. His story should be interesting though, don't you think? I mean, he was raised in a cult and taught that he was the first of a new and pure race of humans. How much more screwed up can one get?"

Now I'm definitely intrigued.

"Think he's lying?"

Ike gives me a shrug. "Probably. But his tale will be good, I'm thinking."

The first time I head down to his room, he's asleep. I tell Stuart to give me a heads up when he wakes, which turns out to be more than an hour.

Things are quiet on the floor - have I mentioned that yet?

I mean, it's so quiet, I could whistle a tune and have it echoed back to me.

As I drag my chair behind me, there's little response from anyone around me.

Stuart does look up with a questioning glance.

"I'm not to be disturbed," I tell him. "Unless it's the Warden."

Stuart's brows become like caterpillars as he gives me a look. I ignore the obvious question on his face.

I'm here for a deathbed confession and eventually, he'll figure that out.

# CHAPTER FOUR

ADAM TO JACK

*Not sure what exactly you want to know, if I'm being honest.*

*Sure, not many people know about me. That's the benefit to being my father's son...he's got enough connections that he was able to get me admitted without too much fanfare.*

*Maybe that's the story you want to hear? Why I'm here?*

*Or are you wanting to know the story of my birth? Why I was supposed to be the new Adam, first of a new kind of human race?*

*It's all a bunch of bullshit now. Didn't take me long to figure that out.*

*It's not much of a story.*

*I can pare it all down to one sentence, are you ready?*

*I was brainwashed by some bullshit, all in the name of an experiment, an experiment that went too far, and someone had to pay the price.*

*I was accused of ritualistic cannibalism. Did you know that? Again, just more bullshit.*

*Oh, I can tell by your eyes you're interested. Hmmm, it's like something you'd read in a novel, that's what you're thinking, right? Well, I guess.*

*My life could be made into a movie; there's enough sensationalism attached to my actions. It might even be a hit.*

*So what will you do with this story of mine? Sell it for money? Land a deal of some sort?*

*Won't tell me? Whatever. The doctor says I'll be dead soon if I'm not*

*careful. This neck brace I'm in is the only thing keeping me alive. Did you know that? One sudden move and the tiny thread that's keeping my brain attached to my spinal cord could break - or something ridiculous like that.*

*I don't want surgery. Did you read that in my file?*

*If there was any way to save me, I don't want it. I want to die. I want every single cell in my body to be incinerated after my death. Nothing goes to science. Make sure you write that down.*

*Science is what put me in here. Screw them. Screw their experiment. Screw whatever hold they have on me.*

*The minute my father put me in here was the minute I denounced him and all his bullshit gimmicks.*

*Fuck him to hell. I hope his death is painful and drawn out.*

# CHAPTER FIVE

ADAM

I was raised in Paradise.

My Paradise is a holistic gateway spa located in the desert.

It's a spa known to the rich and famous, and unless you are pretty wealthy, there's no way you could afford to stay for a week or longer.

Paradise was initially funded by the wealthy inclined to discover new alternatives to growing old.

Because of this funding top, scientists came on board...but as a child, I wasn't aware of any of that.

Until the age of four, I was carefree, running through the green grass with bare toes, and the only world I knew was within the walled confines of this exotic resort.

I never ventured out of the gates, not until I was at least sixteen years old.

As a child, I didn't need to. As I grew older, sure, I became interested in what was beyond, but I quickly learned life outside the walls was like living in a nightmare.

There was a virus outside the walls that made everyone impure and dirty, and unless I wanted to become like them, I needed to stay where I was protected.

As a child, when you're told something like this, you tend to believe the adults.

I was also told I was special, that I was one of a kind, which explains why my name is Adam.

Ready for a truth bomb?

I'm a direct descendant of the Lillith.

Do you know who she is?

You know, the biblical Adam and Eve, right?

Well, before Eve came along, there was his first wife.

Here's the kicker: she's still alive.

Don't look at me like I'm crazy. The crazy ones are those who raised me and brainwashed me into believing this lie.

The story goes like this: Lilith was created alongside Adam, made of dust, and was God's favorite.

When things didn't go well between her and Adam, she took off, unwilling to share space with him anymore.

Adam pouted and demanded that God provide him with another mate but one he could control better. God did, but not until after He'd sent angels to find Lilith and convince her to return to Adam. They even promised her half of Paradise as her own, but she wanted her own Paradise, not one shared with someone like Adam.

Do you blame her? The guy seemed weak. You know? I mean, he let some woman convince him to eat a stupid apple and lose his own Paradise.

Lilith, she knew better. So she waited at the edge of the Paradise for God to meet her.

Because she was His favorite, He offered her the world, promising there was more than just the garden out there and that if she would help to care for it, He would always care for her.

Unlike Adam, because he sinned, and Jesus, who was born of humans, Lilith was created in the image of God, breathed into life by His very breath, and will never die.

I know, crazy, but Jack, I'm telling you the truth. I swear on whatever you think is holy.

There are whole societies dedicated to Lilith, even though you'll never see her name.

You will see a sigil marked in a tile at the front doors, a circle

with what looks like two keys intersecting with a flock of her hair.

If you google Lilith, she'll be called a demon, they'll say Satanists sacrifice babies to her, and other nonsense.

None of that is true.

She's as old as time with the beauty of a twenty-something wet dream.

I've seen her.

I've no idea whether she's the real Lilith, but the woman portraying this myth is supposedly my mother.

Yeah, I know. Ridiculous. Crazy. Deranged. Total brainwash bullshit.

I met the woman twice. Once as a child and once as a teen, just before I went on my first mission.

My childhood memories of my mother are...well, they're everything a child wants to believe a mother would be.

She came and found me one day playing in the gardens. I had a favorite spot beneath a cluster of trees that reminded me of a fort. It was behind all the staff buildings, so out of sight for the guests.

She came and sat with me, not being worried about getting her all-white outfit dirty.

I thought she was an angel.

She laughed and said they were much bigger than she was.

I asked if she'd ever seen an angel, to which she said she has, that she has one guarding her all the time and that one day I'd have my own protecting me.

Cool, right?

I remember Lilith being beautiful in a classical sense. There was a lightness, a brightness, about her that radiated peace.

The whole time she sat with me in my fort, I felt like I was being wrapped in a mother's hug.

Funny, I can feel that hug even now.

Whenever Lilith came to visit, it was always a big deal. She moved around a lot, from property to property, her responsibilities taking her everywhere, but she told me our Paradise was her most

favorite, mainly because that's where I was.

I believed her.

I don't anymore.

I was raised to believe I was special.

I was told that I was the first of my generation, a generation of purity the earth hasn't seen yet.

I didn't understand what that meant, but I knew it had to do with all the tests I underwent from an early age. My blood was constantly tested, poked and prodded, and treated for things I didn't believe I was sick for.

See this scar? That's where they inserted a port. I had that thing for years, until my sixteen birthday, when I was deemed pure of body and spirit and was sent on my first mission.

My childhood was...well, I don't know what to compare it to, really. I was loved. I was spoiled with all the affection, I played outside, learned to read at an early age, and was taught a variety of martial arts. I excelled at my schooling, loved all the physical training, but I hated the medical part.

They had a room just for me when it came to all the procedures they put me through. I had no idea what was happening at the time, I honestly didn't. They told me my body was fighting a disease, and if they could figure out how to fight it, I just might save the world.

That was a huge burden to place on a child. I bore it nicely, though, or that's what my father always told me.

The woman I thought was my mother was actually my caretaker.

Her name was Bethany. She was an older woman with silky white hair, laugh lines, and the soften smile I've ever seen on a woman. She was firm but not strict, supportive but not hard, encouraging and loving.

She told me Lilith had given her strict instructions on how to bring me up and that it was her duty to follow those instructions. After all, Lilith was the world's mother, wasn't she?

Looking back, my life was crazy. Who grows up in a cult? Who grows up believing they are the first being in a line of superior beings? God, I was so fucked up, it's unbelievable.

I truly believed I was better than Jesus and Mary combined. My shit didn't smell. My actions were god-like. I couldn't do any wrong because I was the purist of pures in a world full of sinners.

There were no other children, not during my time there. No, let me clarify that. There were babies, but they never survived past the sixth-month mark. They were born in a laboratory, and that's where they lived, in coma-induced stasis, used primarily for experimental procedures.

Yes, the people at this so-called spa were monsters. I see that now. Back then...it was all I knew. It was normal.

You do remember that I said the spa was only for the rich and famous, right? You had to pay for the benefits received at this spa.

All those experiments done on those lab-born babies were for research purposes, but research done outside of official government funding.

The people who came to the spa signed waivers giving away all rights to seek retribution if their treatments didn't work. Still, those waivers also meant they were willing to turn a blind eye to how their creams, gels, and injections came to be.

People don't mind being blind sheep when the benefits are theirs for the taking.

# CHAPTER SIX

Let's talk about my father.

He's quite the character. His name is whispered amongst the who's who of Hollywood and rich reality stars who are looking for a touch-up or a miracle cream that you can't procure elsewhere.

You won't find ads for his products in any magazine or online site. There are some brands, especially his, that are above that.

Sometimes he'll add gift certificates to the spa inside those goodie bags stars receive at those award ceremonies, but he spaces those out, so they're never expected and always anticipated.

My father was born into the cult as well. Not like me, though. He was born the natural way, the real way, the only way to be a legitimate heir.

I might have been born to be the first pure one, but I could never follow in the footsteps of my father. Those shoes are too polished, too cultured, too inbred. All of this, the cult, the life within it...my father didn't build it. Neither did his father or even his father's father.

Being the Overseer for the US retreat has been in my family's lineage for a very long time.

I have a brother who is being groomed to take over. He was blessed by Lilith, which is important. She always has the final say over everything.

Am I telling you what you want to hear yet? Probably not, right?

Sigh. Without knowing the background, nothing I say will make sense for later.

It's important you understand the culture I was raised in.

I was born in a lab, but raised within the confines of the cult.

I was the fortunate one - something about my genes stood out.

Legend is that Lilith was able to produce her own heir every century, or every hundred years, one that was full of purity and perfection, much like herself.

This child would live a long life, not eternal like her, but long. Most of her children end up running society as we know it around the world.

What? You don't believe me?

Everything you've ever heard of regarding one world domination, a secret society in charge of everything, it's true. Believe me or not, it's all true.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking...this man is crazy. I'm not.

Think about it, Jack. Why are there so many books, movies, documentaries about secret societies? For one single reason: we know they exist, and we're curious about them. There's barely any information out there about them, but enough to garner our interest and put us on notice.

I can see you want to ask a question. Out with it.

No, wait...let me guess because I have a feeling you have a lot of questions. How about we start with this one: If I'm her one heir, how did I end up here?

That's a whole story on its own - one I'll share, don't you worry about that.

Remember how I told you I'd only met her twice in my lifetime? There's a reason for that. Those were markers for certain things that happen within my genes.

Until then, I was raised mainly by Bethany and the other staff. I only ever saw guests from a distance and was never allowed outside when others were present.

I guess you could say I was raised as a ghost, only visible to a select few.

Father was in my life as much as possible...when he was around

and available, which wasn't often because he was a very busy man. Being the Overseer meant having responsibilities, and raising a child was not one of them. Besides, until my gene markers were clearly distinguished, there was no point...there would be no clear direction to my path until my sixteen year.

Until then, I was raised for both pathways, just in case.

When Father was around, he was like a shadow, and I couldn't wait to be touched by his presence.

All I wanted was for him to acknowledge me, notice my hard work, and praise me for being diligent.

Sometimes I'd play on the floor of his office while he talked on the phone or worked on his computer. There were plenty of times I'm sure he forgot I was there, and I heard things I shouldn't. Sometimes he'd have me sit in the chair across from him, and he'd explain things to me, reveal secrets about our little part of Paradise no one else knew.

He never told me too much, though, only enough...

I often saw my father with beautiful women. I asked him about it once, and he told me in his eyes, no one was more beautiful than Lilith. All these women wanted to be perfect, but they were broken inside. He warned me to stay away from those women, only seek the perfection, because it's what I was bred for.

Perfection is an honor, a gift, something everyone seeks but never finds. The only woman to own Father's heart was Lilith, and everyone else was a means to an end.

Wanting or needing him to love - that was never something I thought about. I wanted him to be proud of me. Love wasn't something discussed in my childhood. Love wasn't a word used in my upbringing.

When Bethany told me she was proud of me, that was the highest praise I could receive. When Father said I was coming along, I would beam because I knew I was on my way to earning his respect.

The only one I ever heard say she loved me was Lilith.

Did I have many friends? You do remember me saying there were no other children, right? Babies, yes, they were all in a special ward.

I, however, was the only child running around the grounds.

All of that changed when I was sixteen.

Until then, I was considered to be Lilith's heir. Remember when I mentioned that? Through the miracle of science, her perfect genes were mixed with my father's, and I was the successful experiment.

Every ten to sixteen years, our genes go through a mutation stage. During these years, I received a concentrated focus from the medical department, where they analyzed my blood cells.

I underwent test after test, and I never understood what they were looking for.

Remember how I told you I was born with a disease, that if they could figure out how to cure it, all of humanity would be saved?

They lied. That was the lie created to force me to be docile, to not complain, to remain complacent.

They were checking to ensure my genes remained pure.

Until the age of sixteen, I was the heir apparent. I was never informed of what that meant, of what my duties would be. I was told it would be disclosed during my initiation ceremony.

Well...I had an initiation ceremony, but not as the pure being to start a new generation of superior beings.

Turns out, if you don't end up being Lilith's heir, you're not discarded: you become redirected.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

ADAM TO JACK

*I know it's a lot to take in, and no doubt it all seems extremely far-fetched, but I can promise you it's not.*

*Everything I'm telling you is the truth.*

*I can see in your eyes you don't believe me.*

*Fine. Sure, I'm making it all up. It's the fictional story I've wanted to write, and I hope I become a bestseller through you.*

*Do you think it'll work?*

*My name will never make it into print. No one will ever know my story, know my truth, even know me, so why would I lie?*

*Hell, the name I came into this Asylum with even isn't my actual name.*

*My birth certificate was forged because, you know...I was created in a lab.*

*Everything about me has been created by someone else.*

*I guess you could say my whole being has been fictionalized.*

*Every. Single. Thing.*

*The only truth is what you're hearing, and even you don't believe it.*

*How do you think that makes me feel?*

*I'm living a god damn movie script that's one hundred percent real, but it's too real to be believable.*

*Most people move around in this world with blinders on, only willing to see the mundane, to stay in their lanes all because it's safer that way.*

*It's as if we have this knowledge deep inside us that to veer outside*

*our predetermined lane would sacrifice our safety and everyone else around us.*

*All those crazies who believe in a secret society, they're the ones people should be listening to, not the very people covering up the truth by creating a believable lie.*

*Why do you think there are so many movies about secret assassins and ex-military for hire? Why do you think there are so many government conspiracies floating about?*

*Every lie is steeped in a truth. Every story, every scenario, every secret has a kernel of truth to it - surely, you of all people, know that.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ADAM

Life for me started when I was sixteen. That's when I grew up, when I had no choice but to grow up and become an adult.

With Lilith's blessing and my father's approval, for the first time in my life, I stepped outside of the gates of Paradise and became exposed to the sinful world.

I was scared shitless.

You have no idea what it was like - to see everything in person for the first time.

Once it was determined I wasn't the heir, I was given a crash course into what I should expect from the outside.

It was nothing like I'd expected.

On the drive into the city, I was glued to the window, staring out at everything, drinking it in like a wilted plant craving moisture. I couldn't understand how anything I saw was built upon sinful desires...until we made it into the city.

Seeing the world from innocent eyes, everything you consider normal, seemed vain to me. Everything you ignore because it's so commonplace, was new and overwhelming to me.

Once he noticed my reaction, my guide reminded me to focus and keep the task paramount in my mind. I wasn't his first charge. He'd done this a few times before me.

You're wondering what I'm talking about.

This was a training mission.

Since I was no longer pure, but had gone through extensive

training, there was only one other path for my life, and that was to help keep Lilith safe.

There were three main ways to do this.

The most popular was protecting her and our assets via digital means. There was a whole group focused solely on this, based at every location around the world.

Like me, the last heir apparent who was disqualified now heads up the US cyber security division.

Another way is by protecting all assets with a physical presence.

Each leader, including and especially Lilith, had their own security detail. Think of it as the Secret Service for the President.

They've got cushiony jobs, in my opinion.

The other is where I was placed, the most crucial, strict, and unforgiving.

I was being trained to take care of problems. More specifically, problem people.

I was trained to be a cleaner, a contract killer.

I do what needs to be done, without question and without witnesses.

I was good at my job too. It was more than just a job for me, though. It's a passion, a calling. My goal, my only goal, is to protect Lilith, no matter the cost.

Let's talk about movies again - because that's predominately how people have learned to view these so-called killers-for-hire.

They're big, brawny, skilled marksmen with a deadly aim. They can take down anyone and everyone that gets in their way, and if they leave behind a mess, they call in a team to clean it up.

That's only about half right.

Their body features don't matter, not really, not unless the job calls for a small, wiry individual. We have both males and females who are part of the protection team. We have the giant hulks and skinnies too. We have those who pass unassuming amongst the crowds, and others you know will stand out.

What they look like doesn't matter because looks can always be changed. It's the skill that matters.

This first outing was all about seeing how I would function in the field. The expectation was that I'd fail, mainly because everything was new, and I'd been secluded up until this point. Most people are recruited based on their experience. A few, like me, are added based on genetics.

My first outing was a learning session, eyes only, get a feel for what's expected.

Following that, I was taken to this warehouse I'd soon learn to call home. In this place, I learned how to do what it was I was born to do.

My life has been all about protecting Lilith and her legacy. That legacy is important and crucial, and if it meant violence had to be involved in protecting her, then so be it.

# CHAPTER NINE

ADAM TO JACK

*I don't mean to sound so blasé about it, but let's face it, our world runs on violence.*

*Hell, even this place is run by violence, and don't bother telling me otherwise.*

*In the few years I've been here, I've seen how the leadership here is all fear-based.*

*Jack...I can see you don't believe me.*

*Why does that bother me so much? I'm not sure. I should be used to this by now, no one believing me, I mean...why would you?*

*Do you remember when you were a kid, and you would play pretend? Your mother would send you outside to play, to get out of her hair, and you'd spend hours pretending you were a truck driver or a policeman or even a race car driver, right?*

*Maybe that's all I've been doing.*

*Living in some pretend world where I was this big ass assassin who killed for a conspiracy theory hardly anyone knows about.*

*That's what you're thinking, isn't it?*

*Is there anything wrong with that? Is living in a pretend world, one we've created for ourselves, so bad?*

*We all do it, don't we? We have these pretend lives we daydream about, wish we could live. Sometimes we focus so much on those dreams, we stop living in the moment, in the lives we actually have.*

*I can see you don't really care, do you, Jack.*

# CHAPTER TEN

ADAM

Someone needs to know the truth...even if you don't or won't believe me.

I'm not crazy, Jack. I'm not unstable, believing in things that aren't there. I don't have dissociative identity or anything else that psychologists try to put on me.

And no, I'm not pretending to be living in some fuck ass dream world, either.

Do you know why I'm here, Jack?

I'm here because of the connections my father has.

Placing me here, in this backwater forgotten institution, was the only option. Someone had to take the fall with as little damage to the mission as possible.

Why do you think the Warden has protected me for so long?

Why do you think my few years here have been easy and reasonably safe?

This incident that put me here...it wasn't by accident.

I don't believe some victim of my past just happened to see me - I didn't leave victims, Jack.

This was premeditated, deliberate, and for some reason, my father has put the word out that he wants me to die.

He told me he would.

He told me that there would come a time when our secrets weren't safe, and someone had found out about me. It could be in a year, five years, ten years, or longer.

When that happens, not if, but when, he'd send a signal. With that signal, I knew I was to finish my mission.

My one and only mission has been to protect Lilith and her legacy.

I've said that before.

Everything else I do, every action I've taken and continue to take, has been for that exact reason.

Yes, I've killed.

I've killed government officials.

I've been the boogeyman too many times.

I told you I don't leave victims. I also don't lie.

So why am I here then? That's easy.

I made a mistake.

A mistake that cost the life of someone who shouldn't have died.

This mistake made someone in power very angry and threatened to pull funding from Father's project he has on the go.

Whomever this person is, they're close to Lilith, so Father needed to make peace, no matter the cost.

That cost turns out to be me.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

ADAM TO JACK

*So what happens now, Jack?*

*We both know I'm going to die, one way or another. Will it be by your hand? The Wardens? Someone else who sneaks in when your back is turned?*

*Maybe it's even the guard out front?*

*If I could have a say...well, thank you, Jack, that's very kind of you.*

*Can I make a request?*

*Something is irritating the skin around my neck, and it feels like it's on fire. Could you release the neck brace, even just a little?*

*Wait...before you do, I need to know...*

*Do you believe me?*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

JACK

Adam asked me a question, and I answered.

I then did as he requested and released a little of the tension in his neck brace, just to relieve whatever was irritating his neck.

I didn't think it possible, but I guess there was enough room for movement.

Adam twisted his neck, hard enough and far enough that he died instantly.

Turns out Adam didn't need to die by anyone's hand in the end.

He asked me if I believed him.

I'm going to ask you the same thing.

If you're a conspiracy theorist, then you probably were able to find some semblance of truth in what he was saying.

Me, I didn't, and I still don't believe a single word he said.

I don't care what his name really is.

I don't care why he was really here.

His story was entertaining but lacked in a lot of areas. Did you feel that too?

I almost didn't add it to this confession.

I guess the reason I did add it here is simple: the idea of a cult that worships Lilith and experiments on babies just couldn't be thrown into the garbage pile, you know?

I mean...we all need something a little ridiculous to read, am I right?

# HAROLD

PATIENT 835

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS
OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

# CHAPTER ONE

What immediately comes to mind when I say: Doomsday Preppers?

Do you immediately try to differentiate between the two words?

I mean...we've all heard of doomsday cults and religions, right? Where they believe a spaceship is coming to take them to another planet, and everyone drinks the grape kool-aid in preparation.

Plus, I mean, we all know what a prepper is, right?

My mother is one. I'd say she's in the early stages of it, or she's been stuck on the easy level for most of her life.

Whenever something that is a common household good goes on sale, Mom buys as much of it as she can. Her basement is full of laundry detergent, dish soap, paper towels, and bathroom tissue. Let's not mention the food too: there's bags of rice, cans of stewed tomatoes and beans, and jars of olives.

If the end of the world does happen in my lifetime, I'll be able to survive on those olives alone.

I think most of us grew up with parents like that. They grew up in families that lived through the depression, understood what it was like to be hungry, and vowed never to feel that way again.

I get it. I do. I mean...they can't be all wrong, right?

I'm not a prepper, that's for damn sure. If it weren't for Mom, if the end of the world happened in my lifetime, I'd be screwed.

I've heard stories, I'm sure you have too, when being a prepper has worked to someone's advantage...like during the bathroom shortage a year or so ago, or like in the middle of a snowstorm, when all power goes out, and your neighbor has three extra

generators he's willing to share.

I used to laugh at the fucktards who went crazy with this stuff, until the blizzard of ninety-eight, and I realized Mom had bought a generator she kept in the garage.

Now I have my own, a portable one, and I sleep tight during snowstorms without a care in the world.

So what does all that have to do with this next confession?

Harold has been here a long time. He's what we know as Preppers, but he prefers to call himself a Survivalist.

Harold was one of the first inmates I ever met. I plan on writing about that in one of the monthly shorts I do on my Patreon page.

From what I've heard, he's calmed down a lot over the years, but when he first came here to the Asylum, he was bat-shit crazy, and for good reasons.

I've told him a few times that when we meet on my floor, he's got my full, undivided attention, and I've always meant it.

I've been wanting his confession for a long time, mainly because I've never talked to someone like him before, someone who has lived through what he has.

I'm not sure what age you are, but you should know your history, at least. Remember the Cold War? When the United States government decided to have a turf war basically with Russia? Then there was that whole Cuban Missile Crisis. You remember learning about that too, right?

That was also around the time the US government decided to create bunkers to house nuclear missiles...yeah, that Cold War.

Well...Harold, he's got quite the story to tell about living through that, a story that is quite different from the one most of us are familiar with.

Put on your big girl panties for this one. Hold onto your balls cause you're in for a wild ride...and a word of warning...I believe every single word of his confession too.

# CHAPTER TWO

JACK

The day shift decided to have a staff appreciation dinner and made sure to include the night shift, too, so the floor now carries that somewhat nauseating aroma of shit and baked beans.

Between the pigs in a blanket and turd in a curd, which is basically a baked bean in a curry dish, I'm stuffed to the gills with potluck-style food, and the last thing I want to do is walk the floors.

One wrong whiff, and I'll be adding to the mess, if you know what I mean.

We try to do these types of meals at least twice a year, and everyone seems to like it.

The culture on this floor is...interesting. It's different here than other floors. More camaraderie and less competition.

Probably helps that the only patients we see are those close to death, so what exactly are we all competing for? The chance to change diapers, administer medication, be the last person someone sees before they die?

"Seriously, man, I need that recipe. What did you call it again?" Ike plops himself down in a chair and groans, rubbing his extended stomach.

"Mom calls it kinnip. The real term is Galuska." The dish is a simple one, everyone asks for it during these meals.

It's basically tiny dough pieces boiled and then fried in a mixture of potatoes and onions covered in a ridiculous amount of

butter. It's very similar to spaetzle, just without the egg added to the dough.

Mom would tell me this was a staple for her family when they lived in Eastern Europe.

For me, it's a comfort dish.

Mom makes me a large batch each week, and I'll add it as a side to my meals at home or eat it cold while sitting in front of the television.

It's best served hot, though.

Tonight's going to be a long night.

Everyone is suffering from a food coma, and we've got a semi-busy floor tonight, so there will be no napping, even if we'd wanted to.

Buzzers are going off. There's a hum in the atmosphere, even Ike feels it, like a steady thrum that keeps your hands all jittery and your knee bouncing like a basketball - you know what I'm talking about, right?

There's a sense of anticipation, but for what, I'm not sure.

Maybe death? Maybe excitement? Maybe for something other than the norm to occur...but something will.

"I bet you your bar tab we've got an incoming." Ike rounds the corner and pounds his fist on the counter.

I fucking jump. "What the hell?"

"Just making sure you're awake. So, what do you say? One bar tab for the other?"

I lean back and glance over at the clock. Could we get another patient tonight? I've got a few rooms left open, so it's always possible, but to have a full floor when we're all tired? Fate isn't that negative, is it?

"What's your tab at?" I ask. We've done this game before. "Cause I sure as hell haven't seen you down at the pub every night."

Ike shrugs. "Maybe you just left way too early. The age is creeping up on you."

I must have a certain look on my face because he steps back

and holds up his hands in a mock act of surrender. "All right, all right, that went too far. Geesh."

The phone in my office rings, and as I go to grab it, I hear Ike behind me saying, "See, told ya."

Sure enough, it's a call from downstairs letting me know I have a guest on the way.

I yell out to Ike to prepare a room, and then listen as I get filled in on the inmate coming up.

I'm a little excited to learn it's Harold. I've been waiting a long time for him to arrive.

Years ago, I promised him that I would have a treat for him when he made it upstairs. So while I wait for the guards to bring him up, I pour him a little shot of JD and keep it to the side.

It takes about an hour for them to bring him up. Ike meets him at the elevator and escorts him into his room while I walk the floors and check in on everyone.

I imagine our talk will be a long one, at least I hope it will be. I've been waiting years for this conversation. I don't want to be interrupted if it can be helped.

"Jaaaackkk. Jaaaaccccccckkkkk."

Like fingernails on a fucking chalkboard, I stop mid-stride down the hallway. One slow turn of my neck followed by a look over my shoulder gives me a clear view of Victor in all his glory.

"Put that away, Vic. No one wants to see your shriveled dick."

His smile is enough to give me the creeps.

"I need you to wipe my ass, Jaaaaaaccccckkk." Vic holds up his hand, and sure enough, it's smeared with shit.

"Nurse Joe will be in to see you, don't you worry." My tone is menacing, to the point of threatening, and from the way Victor drops his hand, he gets the message.

Nurse Joe is a son of a bitch who takes no gruff. He keeps his head down, does his job, and barely says a word. He's none too gentle, though, especially when our patients act up.

Everyone seems to think they get a vacation when they come

up here, that it's a free for all, but piss me off with antics like what Victor just pulled, and I guarantee they won't like the consequences.

"Need me, boss?" From out of nowhere, Joe shows up behind me, pushing a cart that I should have heard. He's taking care of the medications.

"Nonononononono," Victor mumbles from his room. He's wiping his hand on the bedsheet, leaving smears of shit everywhere.

"Third time today," Joe mumbles. He's on the swing shift, thank God.

"Thought I told you what would happen if you did this again?" Joe stands in Vic's doorway, hands crossed over his massive muscular chest, almost blocking my view.

I don't mind. I can see enough and hear all I need to. Joe has this under control, and I don't have to wipe someone's dirty ass.

I don't stick around, despite being curious as to how Joe will handle Victor. I don't tend to micromanage my staff. I prefer to trust them to do their job, rather than try to do it for them.

Seriously, we deal with enough on this floor. A boss who breathes down everyone's neck, making sure they do their job perfectly, is the last thing they need to be concerned about.

# CHAPTER THREE

A commotion of screams and things being flung against the walls and doors is what greets me as I head toward Harold's room.

"What the hell?" I race down to open his door, ducking as a plastic cup is thrown toward my head.

"Who the hell closed his door?" I glance toward the staff members that race toward me, but everyone is shaking their heads.

"Don't lock me in. Don't lock me in..." The shake in Harold's voice has me ignoring my staff and focusing on Harold. He's standing in the middle of the room, shaking uncontrollably, arms wrapped tight around his wasted frame. The only way he's able to stand right now is from the adrenaline running through his body, and in about three...two...one...I'm rushing forward to catch him in my arms.

"Whoa, it's okay, Harold. Come on, let's get you back in the bed, okay?"

It's not even a struggle to get him back into the bed. It's like he's lost every ounce of energy he had earlier, which is a good thing when looking around.

Everything he'd brought up with him is on the floor.

"We've got glass on the floor, guys," I call out to the hallway.

Ike is there, right away, with a broom, and he cleans up the mess while I get Harold situated in bed and all his monitors hooked up again.

"Harold, man, I'm so sorry. I just wanted to give you some privacy and totally forgot." Genuine regret laces Ike's voice, but I still shoot him a disgusted look.

Every staff member at the Asylum - from the guards to the nurses, hell even the admin staff probably all know that you never close the door on Harold. Ever.

Harold came up with one picture frame that is now shattered all over the floor. I carefully gather the photo and hand it to him. He grabs it from my hands and clutches it tight to his chest.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. So sorry." He says over and over as he rocks himself. It takes some time, but he finally calms down, and when he looks at me with tear rimmed eyes, I can't help but feel for the man.

"Sorry, Jack. I...that was rude." The words come out a little stilted, like they're wrapped around his tongue and don't want to be said. "After all this time..."

"Don't think twice. That was our fault, not yours." I wait till Ike is done cleaning up, and a warming blanket is dropped off before taking my seat.

We sit in silence for a moment or two while Harold stares down at the photo in his hands.

"They all called me, did you know? To say goodbye. I didn't think they would."

His fingers outline each face in the photo, and I can tell he's struggling. "If it weren't for them, I would have killed myself a long time ago," he whispers.

I peer over and see three adults in the photo. Two men and one woman.

"Do you want to tell me about them?"

He swallows hard. "Jesse, Michael, and Aubriannah. She was the baby, named after my wife's mother." His voice breaks before he sets the photo down on his lap and leans back against his pillow.

"My children still think of me as a monster." He holds out his hands and stares at them. "Even after all these years...I'm still the monster they can't accept as their father. I don't think they've ever forgiven me, even though they've tried. Aubri...she came to see me

once. It was too much, though, I think. Her brothers...a phone call every year, that's it. I...I don't blame them. I can't."

I hear the heartbreak in his voice, see how visibly he's haunted.

I can't blame his children either.

Neither will you once you realize just how narrowly they escaped death.

# CHAPTER FOUR

HAROLD TO JACK

*Can you give me a bit, Jack? Then come back, and we can talk? I...I'm not in a good place right now, not with the door and then losing my cool like that. I just need...yes, thank you.*

*[Jack here: I'm more than happy to give Harold some time to himself. No one wants to be vulnerable, not in a moment like that. I get it. So I went back to my station, tore a strip off Ike, drank the forgotten shot of JD I'd placed to the side for Harold, and then sat at my desk and looked through his file once again.*

*I'd totally forgotten about those kids of his, and I wanted to familiarize myself, knowing they are probably important to his story. I gave him about an hour and then returned.]*

*Years ago, do you remember what you told me, Jack?*

*Well...I guess it was more of a question than anything else, wasn't it? You asked me if the world knew the whole truth about what happened.*

*From my reaction, I think you figured out that the world did not know the real story.*

*A few people did, those who needed to know, I guess. The world knew enough, however. They knew enough to classify me as a monster.*

*Do people still view me like that, Jack?*

*All I ever wanted was to be forgotten. Please tell me I have been. One of the guards downstairs told me no one knew my name anymore.*

*I think he meant it to be condescending, but it lifted a weight off my shoulders.*

*No one should know my name.*

*Do you also remember the rest of that conversation, Jack? About that deal?*

*I haven't forgotten it.*

*I wasn't sure I was going to take you up on it, even if it's still on the table. Some secrets...some secrets are meant to be kept, you know?*

*The more I've thought about it, though, the more appealing it is to tell at least someone who won't view me as the monster my children believe me to be.*

*[Jack here: I assured Harold the offer remained the same. A true confession for help with his death. What I didn't tell him was that I'd been looking forward to this visit for a long time.]*

*I'm tired, Jack. I'm sure you hear that a lot, don't you? My body is weary. I've been waiting for this day for a long time. I wish I'd been strong enough all those years ago to take my own life, but something always stopped me.*

*Hope. Hope is what stopped me.*

*I have no hope left. None. Why would I? What's left for me?*

*I can't eat anything. I can barely move without getting exhausted. What's left for me to hope for?*

*My past is filled with regrets, regrets I will never be able to make up for, so what's left for me, Jack?*

*Just time to tell my story. I guess that's all that's left, isn't it?*

# CHAPTER FIVE

HAROLD

In nineteen sixty-one, there was a letter from President Kennedy that changed my life.

Before this letter, there was an overall sense of fear and impending doom, but that letter...it sealed the deal for what the rest of my life would look like.

In that letter, President Kennedy basically informed everyone that a nuclear war was imminent and that fallout shelters were a thing we'd need to get used to.

It was a crazy time. People were building their own bunkers in their backyards. For about five thousand dollars, you could get a state-of-the-art bunker that would keep you safe in case we went to war with Russia.

Neighbors on both sides of us had one put in. We asked our one neighbor if he would take our children if anything happened. He jokingly said he'd take the pudgy one...just in case.

My wife didn't like that idea too much.

Around the same time, I'd lost my job working in a furniture plant, after ten plus years, which meant we had to move.

With everything happening in the world and the fear of a nuclear war on the horizon, we decided to move back home, to be close to our families. We'd both been raised as farm kids, and it didn't take me long to find a house to rent on a piece of land.

The landowner was a huge survivalist, and he gave us a heads up that he had a large bunker built out in the middle of his field.

We were invited to use the bunker if things got bad, which we appreciated.

I mean, I'm not sure if you remember that time, but the government had these signs up all over the place with designated shelter zones. Not only that, but they were issuing these disgusting cookies and containers of water.

Our country was preparing for war, and you'd have to be an idiot not to be aware of what was happening.

The man we rented the house from, his name was Peter Jacobs.

We thought he was our savior. Well, I thought he was our savior. My wife always said there was something about him she didn't like, something that didn't sit right with her.

I dismissed her feelings because she was pregnant, and we all know how emotional pregnant women can be.

Yeah, stupid me. I know.

When we first arrived back in our small town, there was an advertisement in the paper for a farmhand. It was that or work at the fertilizer plant where almost everyone in town worked, where both our fathers have labored after they sold their farms.

I didn't want that life.

I'm not afraid of hard labor, never have been, and since I was a farm kid, nothing stopped me from applying for the job.

I would have worked at the fertilizer plant, don't get me wrong.

I had a responsibility to my family, and I would do anything and everything to ensure I looked after them.

My father didn't raise a lazy man.

I must have made an impression on Mr. Jacobs. I'm not sure if it was my experience, my age, or the fact I was a married man with two children and a babe on the way, but he took a liking to me and not only offered me the job, but also offered the farmhouse too.

What wasn't to like about the man?

Mr. Jacobs was often around, working the farm, not afraid of hard work. He was also stocking up his bunker, firmly believing in the threat. Jacobs had money, and he liked to brag that he had one

of the government contractors actually build his bunker to be similar to what they'd created for the pentagon.

I always acted impressed, even if I did feel like he was going a little too far.

I mean...sure, the threat was real; anyone who lived during that time lived with that dark cloud overhead.

Would today be the day the Russian's said to hell with it and go after our country? One never knew, not back then.

He was a decent man, that Mr. Jacobs. Despite his money, the man knew what it was like to work hard and was never afraid to get his hands dirty.

You've got to appreciate a man with dirty hands. He didn't earn those creases for nothing, you know?

Not everyone was a fan of Mr. Jacobs. Some were. Some would come out and have chats with him during the day. He'd stand out by the barn and talk life with anyone who stopped by.

Those who weren't fans...they really distrusted the man, but never for reasons they could explain.

For instance, both our families, the wife, and mine, didn't like Mr. Jacobs. My mom felt he was a little free with showing his money around. I think that's what they call showboating, isn't it?

My parents warned me to stay as far from him and his kind as I could, but that's a little hard when you work for the man. My father called him a snake, his words and actions slippier than snakeskin but just as dangerous as their venom.

At the time, I didn't see it. How could I?

The man offered me a lifeline and then graciously upped the support when he saw the need. My wife was able to give birth to our daughter in our own home, rather than in my parent's spare room.

To a man, that says a lot.

One afternoon, Mr. Jacobs asked if I wanted a tour of the bunker. Seeing how he was paying me if the man wanted me to take a break and walk through a dozen rooms or more, then I was

fine with it.

The drive to the bunker was a long one. It was set at the very back of his farm, in a section I'd never been to, deep in a wooded area.

When we got out to walk, Mr. Jacobs asked me if I could point out where I thought the bunker would be located. At first, I couldn't. There was no pathway, nothing noticeable for me to pinpoint. Ahead of us was a small hill, and he led me to the other side of the mound with a chuckle.

The first thing I noticed was the concrete doors. They were massive.

"Eight-inch concrete doors with reinforced steel. They'll protect us from any blast." The pride in his voice was impressive.

The bunker inside was equally as impressive. He'd built it to hold a total of twenty-five people. Everything was run by a series of generators, with a hand crank system in place as a back up, if necessary.

He had a total of five generators, which would outlast any radioactive fallout from a nuclear explosion.

I didn't have to fake how impressed I was by all he showed me.

I wasn't shown every room, and most were locked anyway. One room housed all the food wares, another all emergency supplies. The bedrooms were outfitted with bunk beds, shelving units, and trunks for personal effects.

The ventilation system was state of the art, with fans that pulled the air through various filters approved for government projects.

You could see the US stamp on just about everything.

Every step we took, every little detail had been thought out, planned with precision. There was a games room, multiple bathrooms, a library, and even a kitchen that would have made my wife proud.

I kept quiet as we walked through the bunker. By the time we were done, Mr. Jacobs wanted to know my thoughts.

Thoughts? I only had one.

How could I ensure my family was one of the few allowed entrance into this bunker?

If this man could provide safety for my family, I would sell my soul if that was needed.

Turns out it was.

# CHAPTER SIX

HAROLD

Mr. Jacob invited me to join him and a few others for drinks one night.

I was surprised to see everyone who was there. I mean...I'm a nobody. My family is nothing in this town, but here I was toasting to survival with the mayor, a banker, a lawyer, the owner of the fertilizer plant, and a pastor.

Things were all friendly at first. There was a sombreness to the group that caught me off guard too.

It didn't take long for me to realize that this was a meeting of the true leaders of the town, the ones who ran things.

I stayed in the background and listened in as they held their private council meeting, with the discussion of the town emergency shelter as a top priority. I don't remember much of the talk, but I do remember feeling disappointed that they didn't value the hard work of the town citizens, not like they should have.

When the preacher started speaking, there was a subtle shift in the atmosphere, like this was the reason why everyone was there.

Jack, have you ever been in the presence of someone so compelling that they took your breath away? That despite all your doubts, something inside you screams recognition for whatever bullshit they're trying to sell you?

That was me that night.

I swear inside that I knew I should walk away, but something about the preacher and what he was saying glued my feet to the

floor.

God had spoken to him.

God had shown him that we were in the end times and that He's provided a way for a select few to survive. Everyone in the room that night had been preassigned a task, and that included me.

Me. A simple worker with no aspirations other than to protect his family.

You can imagine my shock, right? I mean...I'd only just been invited, and I doubt the preacher even knew I was going to be there. How could God have already spoken to him about me unless all of this was predetermined?

I'm a simple man, Jack. Simple enough that this rocked my world.

The mood in that room that night changed, and I could tell that they were finally discussing what they all were there for: the end of the world.

I don't know how these men knew when things would happen, but they did.

Not the day or the hour, of course. That would be preposterous, right? Even the bible says no man knows the specifics like that.

But this preacher, he had an idea, and that evening he told us the time was coming, the signs were all there, and we need to step up, or we'd lose out on God's protection.

I tried to pay attention to everything they discussed. They were talking about supplies and fees and who were considered unworthy. Most of it went over my head, but all of it I kept track of.

What was interesting to me was this: never once did a question get thrown my way, nor was I ever expected to answer any of the questions thrown about.

I had lots of questions that I never voiced. The main one being: why was I there?

My wife basically said the same thing to me too.

In the world of those who were there that night, I was a

nobody, and in their worlds, those nobodies were the people who usually ended up taking the fall for something.

I thought my wife was a bit overdramatic, but I never said that to her. I just nodded and kept my peace, something I learned to do early on if I wanted a peaceful home.

I doubt my wife and your mother were very different, Jack. You don't have to say anything, but I bet your mother was the strong one, right? The one who ran the house? I may have worked to pay the bills and fill the fridge, but she was the one who made sure there were meals to eat, a clean bed to sleep in, the kids paid attention as needed, and the house ran smoothly.

Women were strong in those days.

No, no, I'm not disparaging the women of today's society. I know nothing about them, let's be honest. The only ones I can draw any conclusion from are the women who work in this hellhole of a place. They are firm, authoritative, in control, and I'm sure they could wipe the ass of any man who said otherwise.

What I'm trying to say is this: I should have listened to my wife.

I can give you a list of 'should haves' from that night: I should have questioned why Mr. Jacobs would bring me into the inner circle. I should have doubted when a man claimed to be the only one to have heard from God directly.

I should have listened to my wife instead of thinking I knew best.

If I had...I wouldn't be here. That's for damn sure.

Regrets are the poison of life, Jack. They eat away at your soul, leave you questioning so many things. Let's be honest - you question all the things. Every last decision you ever made, every action you ever took, every time you didn't speak up when you should have.

My life...it's full of so many regrets. I have more than a lifetime of regrets to make up for.

The only thing on the news was the possible nuclear strike.

Posters were posted all over town to alert residents to the

shelter. People were having barrels of water and biscuits dropped off, and more and more town folks were having bunkers built in their backyards.

The only thing we knew was fear.

My wife filled our cold storage with canned goods and those god-awful biscuits, just in case. The women's guild in town even started doing pantry boxes for those who couldn't afford to purchase all the necessities, and of course, my wife had to get involved.

I tried to tell my wife not to worry, that Mr. Jacobs promised us a spot in his bunker, all of us, including the kids, but her father had a bunker built at their place and made sure there was enough room for all of us. If we were going anywhere, it was to be with family, she said.

Between you and me, there was no comparison between Mr. Jacobs bunker and her fathers. I put my foot down that we would seek protection in a bunker that could accommodate us and our family without making us feel like sardines.

I slept on the couch that night.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

HAROLD TO JACK

*I was living my best life at that point, Jack. I was too stupid to see it.*

*Everything I'd wanted was there, in my life. I had a wife I loved with all my heart, three children, a job I enjoyed, a roof over our heads, and we were happy.*

*Well, as happy as one can be before the end of the world happens.*

*Don't get me wrong, things weren't picture perfect, and I'd be a fool to pain it otherwise. We fought. Of course, we did. The stress we were all under was ridiculous. Neighbors fought with neighbors. Families with families. Our kids were being forced to do drills at school in case of nuclear fallout.*

*As a parent, I was failing my children, not protecting them, and keeping them safe.*

*Mr. Jacob's shelter seemed like the perfect solution, but what if we didn't get to it in time? What if there was no warning? What if things happened during the day when no one was home - wife was in town, kids at school, and I was out in the fields?*

*I barely slept, Jack. All I could do was worry and plan then make contingency plans...even while realizing none of that mattered.*

*You know what I did, right? You already know the ending to this story, right?*

*Everything I was accused of...they're all true, to a degree.*

*Do you know what it's like to go crazy, Jack?*

*To have everything taken from you, to be forced to do anything and everything to survive only to find out none of it really mattered?*

*You probably don't.*

*When I look back on my life, I think about those days, with my children and newborn, with my wife and her hugs, how she'd wrinkle her nose every time I wrapped her in my arms after a hard day outside, or just how contented she looked when she was fast asleep...I miss those days, Jack.*

*I really do.*

*My life ended while my children were still young. It took me a long time to realize that. It certainly didn't continue when I came here.*

*You know what life is like here, Jack?*

*No, you only think you do. It's different for you, though, for you and for everyone else who works here. Your shifts here are just one part of your day, a checkmark in the to-do list of life. Go to work. Check. Go home and relax. Check.*

*There's no list for us after we get here.*

*How many people do you know have left this place alive?*

*I've asked around. Not many.*

*Once you come here, it's like you're forgotten.*

*This becomes your life, and there's no living despite the routine they create for you in here.*

*There's not. Don't bother arguing with me.*

*What do we have to live for in here?*

*The chance to go out in the garden? Maybe an extra piece of cake or an extra scoop of ice cream?*

*The opportunity to come up here and die on our own terms instead of getting offed by some asshole downstairs?*

*This isn't life, Jack. This isn't living. It's a stasis pod, purgatory. The only chance on redemption in here is if you're able to make your day nurse smile or the guard look the other way for a few seconds of peace.*

*This is a fucking hell hole, and you know it.*

*I've already lived in one hell hole. I should have killed myself the day they put me in here.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

HAROLD

The Preacher...he was an interesting fellow.

The missus and I started attending his church. Not because we were religious, but because it was the right thing to do as members of our community.

Plus, he asked me point-blank why he hadn't seen me Sunday mornings.

I kind of got the feeling that it was a prerequisite to be in the club, you know what I'm saying?

Sunday morning and evening were all about getting ready for the end times. Who would remain faithful? Who would remain diligent? Who would remain steadfast in God's word and not let fear sway them from the Word of God?

I made sure my heart was right. Every Sunday, I walked away confident if the world ended in that second, I would meet my maker with a smile.

I didn't want that to happen, though.

The Preacher wanted to know who was ready to die for God.

Of course, I raised my hand. I wasn't going to be the only person in those pews who didn't. Obviously, he wasn't speaking literally, that was obvious.

He warned us we needed to be ready for anything, especially for the fallout that was sure to come from the Cold War our country was in.

We were living in the end days, and we all knew what that

meant.

Wednesday evenings, Mr. Jacobs would make sure I attended the weekly meeting. Eventually, I started taking notes, keeping lists of what decisions were made, things said and agreed upon. When Mr. Jacobs put me in charge of inventory for the bunker, that's when I realized what my role within the group was.

Mr. Jacobs handed me over all his inventory records and asked me to make sense of them and ensure we had enough supplies for at least twenty-five years.

Yes, you heard me right. Twenty-five years.

Can you imagine having to stock enough food for 25 years? It's crazy. The idea that one person could figure out everything we needed for twenty-five years was ridiculous.

Yet, that's precisely what Mr. Jacobs wanted me to do.

I didn't want to disappoint him.

I still have nightmares about those supply lists.

In my dreams, we never have enough food or toilet paper, or toothpaste. Sometimes, in those dreams, I'd walk into the supply room, and all the shelves would empty, without anything on them, and in the background, I hear small children crying.

The worst is when I'm locked in a room, it's pitch black, and death is always just out of my reach.

You know what I'm like with doors. Being stuck in a room, I can't handle that.

I think it took a total of two months from the time I took over, before Mr. Jacobs felt that things were ready, and it was just a matter of time now. We were in waiting mode.

I once asked how he funded the bunker and determined who would use its protection.

"The answer is simple," he said. "It's all about how desperate someone is to stay alive. Everyone has their price."

The only issue with that statement was this: I didn't have to pay for my spot in the shelter. Not for mine or for my family.

"The people paying for security are also paying for luxury.

That's where you and your wife will come in."

It didn't take a genius to realize what my role was. I was the worker.

When I told the missus this, she threw a few plates toward my head and told me in no uncertain terms that if she was going to play maid for anyone, it would be for her family and not for complete strangers.

I couldn't change her mind, no matter how I tried.

I wanted to have both a wife and a happy life, and if I wanted to make sure I continue to have a happy life, then making my wife happy was what I needed to do.

So as far as she was concerned, yes, we were going to spend time in the bunker with her family.

Between you and me, my hope was that when all Hell broke loose and we had to rush to safety, Mr. Jacobs bunker was closer than her parents.

Again between you and me and the rest of the world, we all know how that turned out.

This next part, Jack, is hard.

This was when my life ended. I live this day over and over in my head all the time. I think about what I could've done, what I should've done, and I live with the regret of what I actually did.

Do you have a day, Jack, that lives in your head?

A day that never changes highlights all the wrong things, evil things, and horrific things you never want to relive?

I can't tell you how many psychiatrists I've spoken to since coming here about that day.

At first, the conversations would be about how I felt, how do I still feel, and what do I think I could've learned from my experience.

What could I have learned?

Let me tell you what I learned.

I learned that the government feeds off of crisis moments.

I learned that the government needs those crisis moments in order to better themselves, and whatever sick and twisted plan they have in place. I learned that without those crisis moments, the government doesn't have absolute power.

I also learned that you discover people's true characters in times of crisis. Not just other people, though, your own character, too.

You think you would react one way, but when shit hits the fan, I can guarantee you that how you think you'll respond is different from what will happen.

I also learned what Hell is really like.

Hell isn't some fictional place that preachers make up in order to fill the pews and get money from people.

Hell is real.

Hell is being stuck in a moment of regret, a moment you can never take back, a moment you can never get out of.

The preacher, he loved to talk about Hell. He would talk about Hell more than he would talk about heaven.

And then that eventually stopped.

That's a story you'll want to hear.

All right, fine. You're right, I'm doing everything I can not to talk about this one moment. This is the last time I have to talk about it, though, right?

It was a Wednesday morning. The school bus had just pulled away from picking up the kids, and the wife was headed into town to work with her women's group and create more survival kits in the case of Armageddon. I did what I usually did and grabbed my gear before I headed out to the barn.

It's funny how big moments like this you remember some of the tiny details while forgetting the larger picture.

I remember the smells as I walked from the house to the barn, I remember the crisp wind, I remember the crunching sound of the gravel beneath my feet as I left the grass. I remember the squeak of the wet door and the thought that I needed to oil the hinges.

What I don't remember are the last words I said to my family

that day.

I don't remember if I told my wife I loved her.

I can't remember if I gave my children a final hug. I should've told them that I loved them, that I was proud of them, that I couldn't wait to see them again.

I can't remember if I did. I should have. Those should've been the last words my kids ever heard from me, and I wish I could remember what I said.

In my head, that day was like any other regular day, they went to school, my wife did her thing and I went to work.

I didn't think that that day would be the day my world would end.

I was out in the barn tinkering with the tractor that hadn't been working lately. I replaced some belts and gave it a good oiling, made sure there was gas in it, but there was some type of sound that just told me it wasn't right.

That's when the sirens went off.

They were loud shrilling that I can still hear in my dreams. I hear them when I'm awake, too, like a distant memory and distant sound that's always there. It's like when you have a ringing in your ear. That's what I hear all the time.

The alarms aren't anything like you would expect. They're louder and more piercing than an alarm clock or a bell towing on a church. They are piercing, brown pant staining, heart-attack loud.

They're the last thing you want hear, even though they're the only thing everyone keeps telling you you will hear when the end of the world happens.

About four months ago, our town did a test of the warning system, in case of a nuclear attack. It was all over the news, flyers were up all over town, and thankfully because we have a fertilizer plant in town, we already had a warning system set up.

I damn thought I'd have a heart attack the first time those sirens sounded.

My little one, she was out in the yard with me, and she

screamed bloody murder, racing toward me in fear, her face so horror-stricken it burned into my mind.

I can still picture that fear on her face, the absolute terror, and I still feel as helpless I did then.

When I close my eyes, my heart pinches just a little, and I picture that moment. The way her chubby little legs ran towards me, her arms outstretched, her fingers reaching as fast as she could to touch me.

I feel her in my arms still. I held her close to my chest, so close I could feel the rapid beating of her heart.

Do you know what that's like, Jack? To reassure a child who is afraid of what's happening around her? You're helpless. It takes forever for them to calm down, to hear the reassurance in your voice, to be able to feel the rubbing on their back, and even then…

Ahh, it hurts Jack. Hurts to remember even that, you know?

Just because you're worried about something happening doesn't mean you're prepared for it when it does.

When the warning signal went off that Wednesday morning, I jumped out of my skin and then froze.

What about my family?

Wife and I would talk scenarios over and over about what would happen if, what would happen when. I always thought it would happen in the dead of night when my families all under my roof. The alarm would go off, we would hear the sirens crystal clear, grab the kids and the bags we tucked away, pile in the truck, and head to her parents house.

It wasn't what I wanted, but my wife insisted.

Except this time, the warning sign went off during the day when no one was around.

My wife was in town. My children were at school. I was in the barn, beneath a tractor.

I was calm. Stupid calm. You know, that type of calm when nothing makes sense, where you know you should be rushing, you know you should be panicking, and yet you do nothing but the

most mundane task at hand? That was me. I put all the tools away.

Like what the fuck Jack, we're about to be toast from a nuclear explosion and I am worried about putting my fucking tools away. Tell me how that makes sense?

Yeah yeah I know, the mind shrinks all told me that my stress circuit or whatever the fuck that is, was basically broken. Everyone has this feedback loop that signals your brain to go into some responses stress and hyperactivity. My brain just froze that day.

It doesn't freeze anymore, as you can see from when someone closes the fucking door.

I can't believe I acted like that. I am sorry, Jack. That was uncalled for. Yes, I know, stop apologizing. Fine.

I knew my wife would go and pick up the kids. I also knew that she would then head to directly to her parents. She would be safe and I just need to get there.

Still…I pictured my children and how they felt in that moment.

Did they drop beneath their desks like instructed? Or were they outside during recess, and they had to rush back in to the school?

Did my little one scream again in fear, when she goes to her teacher, oh God, I hope her teacher was there for her.

I knew my wife would get the kids, that nothing would stop her from doing what I couldn't in that moment - protect our children.

I put all my tools away, dirty rags hung up, and made sure the tractor was ready to go, just in case this was a false alarm. I had every intention of running to the house to grab all our to-go bags. I fully intended to head over to my wife's parents.

I had every intention of being with my family.

The sirens were still going. They're piercing, splitting the air, and they wouldn't stop. I finally get my ass in gear and I start rushing, realizing this is happening, that the end of the world is really here. If I want to survive, I need to get to my family.

The only thing stopping me was Mr. Jacobs.

# CHAPTER NINE

HAROLD TO JACK

*Do you know what hopelessness feels like, Jack?*

*I doubt you do.*

*Yeah, I see in your eyes you know what I'm about to tell you. Well, you know what? Screw you and your sympathy. I don't want it or even need it, thank-you-very-much.*

*Hopelessness is the worst feeling. Give me depression, psychosis or any other shit...at least there's hope for something with that stuff. But what I felt that day...it never goes away.*

*That day was the beginning of my Hell. No one can understand that.*

*[Jack here: Harold is getting quite agitated, so I suggested we take a break. He asked that I not leave his room, so while I sat there and twiddled my thumbs, he focused on breathing and calming down.]*

*You're not a father, right? I think you told me that once. Has that changed? No? Okay, well, as a father, all I want to do is protect my children.*

*I wanted them to have a long life, a safe life, a life full of possibilities, but for that to happen, I needed to be there to make sure they were safe and protected.*

*I failed that day Jack.*

*Everything that happens after that day it was like living in a nightmare, that's the only way I can describe it. A nightmare I was*

*never able to wake up from.*

*I really can't get upset at my kids are not forgiving me for what I did.*

*I abandoned them. That's how they see it, and that's only one issue.*

*I did abandon them. I let them experience one of the worst days of their lives, all because I was afraid. My head told me to do one thing, my heart another.*

*I let myself listen to a man that I should've ignored a long time ago. I let his fears, his fantasies, hell, I even allowed his futuristic idealizations infiltrate my own fears and worries.*

*You know what that makes me, Jack? A sheep. A fucking sheep.*

*I ain't no sheep. Never was. Never have been. Well...right then I was, but that was the first and only time.*

*It's easy to get caught up in the moment, especially when there's someone so passionate about what they believe. It's also easy when you're unsure of what you believe yourself.*

*That's how you become the prey. There's really no other easy way to say it. I hate being the prey. Hate being the sheep that follows someone blindly. That just means you're weak.*

*I'm not weak.*

*You know, I've noticed something about this place, Jack.*

*In this place, there are Hunters and prey. There's no middle ground.*

*I'm definitely not a hunter.*

*I refuse to be prey, so I've carved out my own path in here.*

*Neutral ground.*

*I know in the beginning, when you first met me, I was a crazy man. I had to be. I had to set the tone, you know? I did a crazy thing that changed me, lived through Hell, and survived...and if anyone thought they were going to mess with me, I quickly made it clear I'm not one to be messed with.*

*What I am is a survivalist. Do you know what a survivalist is Jack?*

*I'm sure meanings have changed over the years. Back in the 60s, survivalist was used for those preparing for war or the end of the world. Today they're called peppers and we've got quite a few of them, here, in*

*this place, don't we?*

*I'm not a Prepper.*

*I am a survivalist. I am a man who did everything to ensure my own survival, even at the consequence of others. At the end of the day that's the only thing that mattered.*

*I survived so that I could see my family at the end of everything.*

*What I did was horrible, but I had no other choice.*

*None.*

# CHAPTER TEN

HAROLD

I was in my vehicle, ready to leave to be with my family, praying I'd get there in time, when Mr. Jacobs pulled up and blocked my path.

He insisted that I come with him, that this was what he'd been preparing for.

He wouldn't listen to me when I told him I needed to get my family. He swore on his mother's grave he'd already sent someone to pick them up.

He promised they would be safe, protected, and would join us within minutes.

He swore it.

I believed him.

I think I knew deep down not to, but I needed to, you know? I'd failed to protect them, to keep them close, to see what was coming, and when someone else said they had it handled, there was this nugget of hope inside me that needed to believe it to be true.

I chose to believe him. I decided to trust him.

I should have gone with my instinct.

My gut told me not to listen, to insist, to head into town because I knew I could have made it in time.

Here's the ridiculousness of it all, Jack: considering where that damn bunker was, it would have been faster for me to rush into town and join my family at my in-laws.

So many regrets.

I left my truck there and went with Mr. Jabocs, leaving everything of my life behind. I watched the farmhouse, the truck, the barn all fade into the distance as we drove toward the bunker.

Half a dozen other vehicles were already there waiting for us, vehicles I'd never seen before.

How did they get there? There must have been another entrance I wasn't aware of.

I jumped out of the truck and helped Mr. Jacobs unload the back of his truck.

It dawned on me that I had nothing. No clothes. No toothbrush. Nothing of mine with me. I was told not to worry about it that of all people I should know there were plenty of supplies already stocked inside the bunker.

He was right. I did know this. I'd planned for there to be clothing supplies for everyone on the list, including my wife and three growing kids. They weren't much, but I had some pants, shirts, sweaters, and whatnot.

Not enough to last twenty-five years, because let's face it, we would never be in that bunker for that long, right?

I was so naive.

I kept waiting for another vehicle to arrive, the one that was supposed to bring my family, but every time I walked out those bunker doors, they were never there.

Don't worry, Mr. Jacobs kept telling me.

I worried.

Off in the distance, with the sirens still blaring, the sky turned smoky. A feather plume of darkness gusted up in the air, its color dark and ominous. I knew right away what was happening, but before I could say a word, Mr. Jacobs launched toward me, the full weight of his body slamming into mine, forcing me backward.

"It's time." His voice bellowed in my ear as he yanked the door closed.

I tried to stop him. I did. I swear I did. I swear I didn't freeze as I watched him close the door to the outside, to my family.

Moments before he had the door closed and hit a switch I never noticed on the wall, there was a loud explosion, one that was felt beneath our feet.

"It's happened, Harold." Mr. Jacob's said, almost out of breathe from excitement or fear, I wasn't sure which. "The world just ended, and we'll be part of the future."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

HAROLD

The world had not just ended.

That plume of smoke earlier, it wasn't from a nuclear attack, it was from the fertilization plant in town.

The sirens that blared...they were a warning, for sure, but not that the world was ending, but rather that the plan was on fire.

Dad always warned us kids, growing up, that if something was going to destroy this town, it was that damned fertilizer plant.

I hope they made it to the bunker my father-in-law had built on time, because that explosion we heard meant the plant was destroyed and all the buildings, homes and anyone close by…they were all gone.

I tried to open the door, but Mr. Jacobs wouldn't let me. He bared my way and no amount of pushing or struggling could move him.

By this point, others who had made it to the bunker surrounded us and someone grabbed my arms and yanked them back.

The entry area is small, cramped and with the group of us, I became claustrophobic. I remember yelling at them to open the door and Mr. Jacobs telling me he couldn't.

One second I was standing there, about to lunge, and then I was lights out the next second.

Someone had hit me in the back of the head with something, knocking me clean out.

When I came to, I was lying on a bunk bed with Mr. Jacobs

sitting on a chair beside me.

Do you have any idea what it's like to argue with someone who won't budge?

Yeah, you probably do, don't you.

Are you the one who's arguing, or the one who refuses to budge? No, don't answer that. I can already tell there's no arguing with you once you're mind is made up.

Jacobs was like that. No matter how much I explained that what we heard and saw was the fertilizer plant blowing up, Jacobs would not be moved.

He said that no matter what, we needed to wait at least two or three months before opening the door in case of radiation.

There was no danger to us outside those doors, but he wouldn't listen.

I needed to get to my family, to make sure they were safe, and it didn't matter who stood in my way.

I had a whopper of a headache, but I made it to the door and tried to open but nothing would happen.

Jacobs stood behind me and delivered the news that made me hate him. I never wanted to murder someone as I did at that moment.

Thanks to the government contractor who built this bunker, the doors were locked for a solid three months. They had been preprogrammed to only open at the ninety-day mark, if the outside sensor readings gave the all-clear.

Where these sensor readers were located, I have no idea. How it was reading them, again, no idea. Something about proprietary systems installed by the government contractor.

All I knew was that once they were closed and the security lock initiated, there was nothing we could do to open them.

Can you believe that? You would think you'd have a back up plan, a code to input in case things go sideways or the system fails or...any other scenario.

For a man who thought of everything, he forgot the most

important thing - at least in my books. Have a way out.

Jacobs didn't think of that, though. He didn't plan that far ahead, I guess. All I know is that he didn't have the fucking code.

Who the hell doesn't have a code as a backup, in case, oh, I don't know...there is no nuclear fallout, and you'd just overreacted?

Have I mentioned how many were in the bunker yet? Around twenty or so souls.

Twenty of us, including children, were forced to live together for the next three months because some asshole jumped the gun too fast, and I didn't stand my ground.

Three months. At the time, it felt like a lifetime, but looking back...oh God, I wish it had only been three months.

Life was mundane in that bunker, I can't even tell you.

It's one thing to plan, theorize, strategize to live out in a bunker to escape some life-threatening event, but it's another to go through it.

Especially alone.

I marked down the days. I kept busy by taking care of things in the bunker, doing my part in cleaning, fixing, keeping track of supplies. I did everything I could just to keep my mind off wondering if my family survived the explosion, if they were still alive, if they knew where I was...three months of that, Jack, was devastating.

I'm not ashamed to admit I shed a lot of tears over my family. You would have too if you'd been locked away from your mother for months on end, having no idea if she were still alive or not.

Listen, I know things are different now when it comes to the new doomsday bunkers. I've done my research, and I've talked to enough people to know that people are even more obsessed now than before, and the systems put into place are more enhanced than what it was like in the sixties.

A bunker is a bunker though, and no amount of video screens pretending otherwise will change the fact you are locked away in a concrete building buried in the ground.

We had absolutely no contact with the outside. No windows, no phone lines, nothing to stay in touch with another living human being.

Three months.

Anyone could survive three months, right? Sure. It's doable. As long as there is an end date, an exit strategy, anything is doable.

Except, after three months, the door didn't open. On day ninety, we all waited, standing there in front of the door, wondering at the exact time it would unlock and open.

You want to know what life was like in that bunker? It's everything you imagine it would be and worse than you could imagine.

Have you ever seen any of the photos from that time? Visited any of the museums dedicated to the bomb shelters and stuff? Sardines in a cement can. Fuck, we've got more room in our cells downstairs than we had in that bunker.

We were on top of each other. There was a smell within the rooms that wouldn't go away after the second week. Showers were limited and sponge baths were preferred to save water. You were able to find some privacy if needed, but it was behind shelves or in a corner in one of the rooms. We played cards, board games, read books, and bickered about what we all thought happened outside.

I was the only one in the beginning who believed the fertilizer plant had been on fire. Everyone else thought the worst had happened and the Soviets lobbied a bomb at us.

They all believed everyone outside of the shelter was dead, saying that there was no way an explosion at the fertilizer plant could have rocked our bunker like it had.

Come that ninety-day mark though, you can bet people were starting to lean toward my way of thinking. There was hope that their family members would be waiting for them, that this was all a mistake, that all was fine.

I'll admit, when those doors didn't open, when Jacobs explained in more detail how the sensors worked, that hope I had...it started

to disappear.

Not all at once. But day after day, when I'd go to check the door during my morning, afternoon and evening rounds?

Hell yeah, a little piece of my soul died.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

HAROLD

I know I haven't said much about the people in the bunker, and that's for a reason.

I tried to keep to myself; I really did. I was the odd man out, the odd duck, I guess you could say.

The people in the bunker were...different. They viewed Jacobs as their savior and the preacher as their prophet. It was weird and not something I was into at all.

I was caught in the middle of a cult without a membership, and let me tell you, that's not a comfortable place to be in.

They did morning meditation, afternoon prayer, and evening teaching. Whenever they gathered in the group room, I escaped to my bunk, and I'd read.

You want to know if I read the bible? You're not a God person, too, are you?

Hell no.

Not that I have a thing against God and all that, but I was stuck in a bloody cult that all they did was eat, breathe, and even shit, God-talk.

I read anything else I could find, penned letters to my wife and kids...did anything and everything to keep myself occupied.

Honestly, in the beginning - up until the ninety-day mark, I just focused on remaining sane enough so when my family saw me again, I wasn't a basket case.

Three months of isolation can do a number on your mind, don't

let anyone else tell you otherwise.

After those ninety days, when the door wouldn't open ... I had to change my way of thinking.

I needed to find a way to survive however long I was stuck in that bunker, and the only way I knew how to was to keep busy.

It wasn't easy to accept that the door wouldn't open, not any time soon. I started doubting that maybe there wasn't a fire, that there'd actually been a bomb.

How else could you explain why no one had ever found us?

I mean, we would have heard if someone came to the door, right? They would have knocked, pounded, done everything to get our attention, and made sure we were alive.

Surely someone knew we were here, if they were still alive...right?

With so much time on my hands, I knew I'd drive myself crazy if I didn't do something else, so while everyone was busy on their knees praying, I went over the planned itinerary Jacobs had created and put it into motion.

We were supposed to have a garden, and apparently, Jacobs had expected my wife to tend it.

First - who the Hell thinks they can grow a garden in a cement box? Second - this was in the sixties, so we didn't have the upgraded technology that's available today.

That being said, there were these huge crates explicitly meant for an indoor-away from the sun-garden. Seeing how my wife wasn't here to tend it, or the fact no one else had stepped up, I decided to give it a whirl. I found the boxes with a government stamp on them and worked on reading the instructions for the equipment Jacobs somehow got his hands on. Nutrient film or something. It was fairly new, and I had no idea what I was doing, but farming was in my genes, and if anyone could make food grow underground, I was determined to be that man.

In the box was lighting, containers, and a variety of other things. The only good thing about trying to figure it out was that it

kept me busy.

I failed miserably at growing anything in that bunker, by the way. Just in case you wondered. I couldn't grow shit. It was a doomed project from the beginning.

I see you have questions. Don't we all.

Let me guess, you're wondering where this man got his money from, right? I have no idea. I knew nothing about the man. I kind of assumed he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, to be honest.

Not finding out, that was a mistake on my part.

Once again, my wife had been right. I should have listened to her and steered clear of Jacobs - I'd rather have died with my family than be in that bunker.

Living within a cult, because, let's face it, that's exactly what was happening, was something I would never wish on anyone.

You're isolated, shamed, banished from the group all because you don't believe as they do.

They were a crazy bunch in the group, let me tell you.

Preacher, it was like he snapped after the three months.

I'd catch him standing in front of the main door, his palm flat against it, and he'd be speaking in some crazy language, sometimes shouting, other times laughing, but most of the time speaking quietly.

The night teachings would be about things God had revealed to him, things about what life would be like after, about their role in a world where everyone had been damned. He started calling the group the Blessed and said God had heard their prayers.

I don't know, but between you and me, getting locked in the bunker was not a prayer I'd have said, you know?

Our supplies were fine. We were going through food, but not at a stupid rate. I mean, we had enough canned goods, Spam and other government-issued crap to last twenty-five years, right?

The biggest problem, at that point, was the odor. The toilet didn't work properly, so you can imagine the smell, right?

Everyone expected me to fix it, and I tried, I really did, but you would have thought making sure there were at least a few workable bathrooms would have been a top priority. I mean...we weren't eating the healthiest, so you can imagine how that affected our bodies.

I don't really need to go into that, do I?

No, I didn't think so.

That smell, the nasty odor of so many of us packed in one place, it's something that will never go away, you know? All I have to do is think about that place, and the smell hits me, like a bag full of bricks. Going to the washroom has been a struggle for me since then, the smell...I eventually discovered if you put Vicks beneath your nose, you can't smell shit from roses.

You should try it. I mean, this whole place has a particular scent that won't go away, and I know I'm not the first to tell you that.

I continued to check the door during my rounds and when Preacher wasn't standing there laying hands on it. One day it had to open...one day.

I kept my family front and center in my mind, all I wanted was to see them again, be reunited with them again. Dying in that bunker was not going to happen.

Just because there was nothing to do, doesn't mean things weren't complicated.

The children, they seemed to adjust the best. No matter how many times you sank to your knees in prayer though, that doesn't mean you can't go bat-shit crazy. A few men lost it, the fights that would break out over the simplest things ridiculous, and people got sick.

Hell, once one person got sick, everyone got sick, you know? The air wasn't the cleanest, and we were breathing each other's germs; I don't care what system Jacobs had in place.

There was one room in the back of the bunker, it was small, and the ground was all dirt. It didn't take long to find out what

room was to be used for.

At around the six-month mark, people started dying. Guess who had to bury them?

It felt good to do some manual labor, but it was difficult to dig deep enough after six months of living underground.

I knew we would need to pile bodies eventually if those doors didn't open, just like I knew once the first person died, others would start falling like flies killed with Raid.

The first got sick with a regular cold. That person was one of Preacher's die-hard fans and was on some fasting streak, so of course, his body was too damn weak to fight anything.

Who the Hell thinks fasting while eating rations and living like canned sardines is a good idea?

Preacher, that's who.

Him and Jacobs were talking one day in the food room, toward the back behind some shelves. They mustn't have realized I was there. They felt there were too many people in the bunker, that Jacobs honestly never thought they'd be in there for this long. Preacher asked if Jacobs really had no way of opening the door, and Jacobs swore he didn't, that only the higher-ups could open it. They both knew that wouldn't happen any time soon.

Whatever the Hell that meant. I had no idea what they were talking about then.

Eventually, I found out.

Preacher, he came up with the whole fasting idea. It wasn't to see if God would hear their prayers and save us all, it was to free up space.

Fucking bastards.

I remained in the background, ear to the ground, mouth shut and just did the work to keep the place running. If it weren't for me, they'd all have died within the first few months.

I don't remember all their names, to be honest. A few I do. What will you do if I tell them to you?

Change the names? Why? You gonna give this story to

someone? If I tell you their names, it's important, why would you change it?

Well, I think that's stupid.

[Jack here: Harold and I went round and round on this topic. I refused to add real names, so he refused to give me any names at all.]

Fine people died in that bunker. People who shouldn't have. They died because of the insecurities and fears of those in charge, and it was a shame.

They didn't need to die.

The children, they didn't make it past nine months. One by one, they also died, mainly from sickness. We had medication when all this started, but somehow, someway, that medication all disappeared one day.

I blame Preacher. He would hold these prayer vigils, insist on stricter fasting protocols within the group, as they prayed over the sick.

He said it was all God's will if they lived or died. Bullshit. It was his will, Preacher's, and had nothing to do with God.

Everything that happened in that bunker, I blame Preacher for.

Every. Single. Thing.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HAROLD TO JACK

*Listen, I'm not one who tends to hate people. I'm really not.*

*But I think it's safe to say I hated Preacher and Jacobs.*

*Preacher the most.*

*Jacobs was a selfish man who was only in it for the money.*

*Preacher wanted the fame. He wanted to be idolized, and in the end, he thought he was God.*

*You can't like someone who believes they are more than what they are. I can't, at least. Maybe you can.*

*When the children died, it broke my heart. As much as I missed my family, I was glad they weren't with me. If they had been, they would have for sure died in that bunker, and there would have been nothing I could have done about it.*

*When others started dying, too, it scared me. The longer the door didn't open, the more chance I wouldn't make it out of that hellhole alive.*

*I was determined not to die in there. No matter what.*

*Remember those meetings I mentioned before everything happened?*

*Not everyone in that meeting made it into the bunker. Was that planned? At first I would have said no. But the more I watched and listened in on the conversations before Jacobs and Preacher, the more I started doubting everything I'd once assumed.*

*It was in Jacob's master plan not to have everyone in the bunker. He said as much to Preacher.*

*It didn't bother me when Jacobs died. It didn't bother me when any*

*of the others died either. We were at the point where every one of us was going to die in that bunker, whether we liked it or not.*

*It did bother me, though, when Preacher died. It was because of him I was able to stay alive, and I'm not sure I'll ever forgive him for making that possible.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HAROLD

Day four hundred and twenty, the fire happened.

I've no idea how it was set.

I've no idea why it was set.

I do know that it was done on purpose.

The fire started in the back corner of the food supply room. By the time we noticed and put it out, most of our food supply was destroyed.

We were able to salvage enough food for the remaining eleven of us to last a month, if we were lucky. This meant though we would all have one meal a day, and that meal would consist of Spam and oatmeal, the two products that made it through the fire.

Preacher didn't like this idea. He said this was a test from God, because we'd become lax in our faith, and he demanded everyone, including me, fast for the next seven days.

Like that was going to happen.

I wasn't going to fast. I would only take enough to get me through, but not enough to stop the hunger pains.

Three days into their so-called fast, Preacher claimed to hear from God that someone needed to sacrifice themselves, that like the story of Abraham and Isaac, God demanded a show of faith.

No one stepped up. Do you blame them?

Day four, I caught Preacher pulling someone aside and telling them God was angry by their indecisiveness and lack of trust and so He'd tasked Preacher with choosing the sacrifice.

What a pompous prick.

I went to Jacob, but nothing happened.

Sure enough, that night, another person didn't wake up. Preacher claimed it was God's will, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one who destroyed all our medication and kept a few pills for himself to help bring down our numbers.

Honestly, by this point, dying would have been a blessing.

Think about it - we had a massive gravesite just down the hall, and no matter the bodies were buried beneath the dirt, death smells, and that scent seeps into everything. Plus, none of us were healthy.

Four hundred plus days in this hell hole basically guarantees this.

Add someone like Preacher to the mix, a fanatic with some sort of God complex, and we were all doomed.

Those who died early, those were merciful deaths. It was the ones after, seeing how much pain they were in, from something simple as a cold or fever, that was hard to swallow. Could their deaths have been prevented?

Sure. If that door had opened. If someone hadn't destroyed all our medication. If. If. If.

It's easy to live in those 'what if' moments.

Sometimes, you get lost in them. I know I did, for years. Even knowing there was nothing I could have done differently once those doors locked on us.

I'm not going to lie. Sure, I thought I'd die in that hell hole. Wouldn't you? I didn't want to though.

When we were down to our very last supplies, with maybe two days' worth of food left and a week's supply of water, when a lot of my fears were confirmed.

A whispered argument happened in the back hallway between Preacher and Jacobs. I was in the supply room, trying to see if there was anything that could be considered edible, when through the vent, I heard Preacher demanding Jacobs get in touch with the

higher-ups and get the door opened before we starve to death.

Jacobs response? There was still a lot of fresh meat before that would happen.

Fresh meat? What the Hell was Jacobs talking about?

And, more importantly - who were the higher-ups?

Did Jacobs have a way to communicate with the outside and never said anything? Were we all locked in here on purpose? For what reason?

I'd wondered. How could I not? Except, I've never caught Jacobs talking to anyone, never seen any type of receiver or communication device. No phone, no radio, no nothing. So what the Hell did Preacher mean?

Preacher didn't like Jacob's response because he started threatening to tell everyone what Jacobs had been hiding.

That's all I heard.

I have no idea if something else was said or if a look was given, but Preacher shut up good and fast, and I didn't hear another word on the subject.

I won't lie - knowing Jacobs was hiding something, I wanted to know what. Wouldn't you? I mean, we'd been stuck together for over a year. Small spaces lead to very few secrets.

So what was Jacob's hiding?

No one was healthy by that point. We were all slowly dying.

Preacher was still doing his prayer meetings, but it was hard for most people to get out of bed. I don't need to tell you what like, do I? I mean, you're surrounded by dying people every day; you get it.

Yeah, that's what I thought. I'm sure you can picture the situation in your head.

I want you to know that I tried, I really did. I made sure people drank what little water they could. I spoon-fed others just to make sure they had something in their system - even got in a fight with Preacher over it. He said I was wasting precious food that others could have.

For a God-believing man, he sure didn't live like it.

Nothing I did mattered - that's something that will always haunt me.

We were all slowly wasting away, and one by one, everyone died until it was Jacobs, Preacher, and me.

Funny, the other two didn't seem to be as affected by the food shortage, but it wasn't something I could prove.

Yes, they'd both lost weight. Yes, they were skin and bones and weak as Hell. But not as weak as the others had been, you know?

Maybe that was Jacob's secret - he had a secret stash of food hidden away. It's the only thing I could think of.

Turns out I was wrong.

I started sleeping with one eye open, not trusting the last two. They were eyeing me as if I were food, a pig about to be slaughtered and there was no way that was going to happen.

Preacher came at me with a bowl of oatmeal, offering it, which instantly put me on guard.

This was his ploy in the past, being a good samaritan, offering up his portion for the good of another. After a few hours, that person would fall asleep, never to wake up again.

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen to me.

I left the oatmeal out on the table. I meant it as a clear response to Preacher that I didn't trust him. I should have thrown it out.

Jacobs ended up eating it - something I didn't realize until the next morning when he didn't wake up.

Hunger and isolation can be horrible monsters. They play with your mind, create scenarios that feel real, produce fears and delirious fantasies that play with your mind in horrific ways.

I found Preacher talking with the dead corpse of my former boss. Jacobs was on his side, face to the wall and Preacher sat on the bed next to him.

I didn't think anything of it at first until I heard Preacher thank him for providing the nutrition needed to remain alive until the doors opened.

I reminded him the doors weren't opening. That we were all

going to die in here, the three of us.

Preacher laughed. God, I can still hear that laugh in my head. It was the laugh of a man who knew something I didn't.

He reached over, grabbed Jacob's shoulder, and pulled him until his back was against the mattress.

One look and I knew he was dead.

Preacher told me the doors would be opening soon. When there was only a few people left, that's when we'd be set free.

I wanted to ignore him, but I couldn't. It was like all my strength evaporated the more he talked, saying Jacob's kept this really big secret, all because he'd been promised millions, if he led a government-led testing facility.

This was the facility, and we were the lab rats.

I didn't want to believe him.

I still don't want to.

Preacher's rantings continued, and I tried to block him out, but I was his only audience. I don't know why he told me everything, why he confessed he knew all along. It didn't make sense - other than he genuinely thought those doors were about to open.

He started walking around the bunker, shouting into the walls that they could open the doors now, that their tests were over, that there were only two people left.

I didn't have the strength left to carry Jacobs over the makeshift graveyard, so I wrapped him in a blanket and started pulling him toward the bunker's back. It took a long time, I had to stop several times to catch my breath. Preacher didn't offer to help, in fact he completely ignored me.

By the time I'd made it to the closed off room, Preacher was at the main door, with his few belongings, waiting.

He had me convinced. He really did.

That door, though, it didn't open. Not that day. Not the next either.

I remember waking up from a nap and smelled smoke.

Preacher had broken up one of the crates and created a fire. He

was also cooking something over that fire in a pot.

Something that looked like meat.

He wouldn't look at me.

I went to the burial room, and Jacobs body was exposed.

Can you see where I'm going with this, Jack?

If you are starving and the only food available is that from a recently deceased body, would you eat it?

Do you know what a body looks like after three days? It's disgusting.

Hell, no, was I going to eat that.

Preacher got sick. I blame it on what he ate. A day later, he, too, died.

I was all alone then. I also wasn't going to last long. I knew it.

If I wanted to remain alive, if there was any sort of hope for me to survive, I had to do the one thing I said I would never do.

I almost waited too long.

On day four hundred and twenty-nine, I did it.

I ate Preacher.

The calf was the only part with any sort of muscle left over, so that's what I ate first. I gagged with each small bite, but I did it.

Would you like to know how it tasted? No? I don't blame you. That's going too far, isn't it?

I made myself a promise on the first day of living in that hell hole of a bunker. I was not going to die in there. Preacher was my means of keeping that promise.

On day four hundred and thirty, the unbelievable happened. There was a click, something loud and piercing and so different than anything else I'd heard for the longest time.

The door opened.

The fucking door opened, Jack.

Preacher hadn't lied. He'd been telling the truth from the very beginning. Jacob's had been keeping a secret.

People stood outside the door, people I'd never seen before. It was pitch black out, with vehicle lights illuminating everything

around us.

I remember that scene with such clarity. The grass was so high. The air is so fresh. The noises so loud.

I was wrapped in a blanket, a hat was pulled over my head, and someone walked me over to a military vehicle where I was helped up and told to lie down.

Preacher had been right all along.

I'd been part of a test. A fucking test. Everyone in that bunker had to die, and only the final person was let out.

That's what the government did to me, Jack.

It was all a test to see what would happen if people actually had to live in bunkers due to a nuclear war.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HAROLD TO JACK

*I know you don't believe me.*

*No one has. Not really. Not truly.*

*Everyone, including my own family, assumed we took shelter in the bunker out of fear and got locked in.*

*Everyone believes me when I say what happened in that bunker. They had to - the media eventually found out due to a leak, and the body count was made public. I was labeled the cannibal. Regardless of the fact it was what I needed to do to survive and that I only did it at the very end...that's all anyone knows about me now.*

*I was placed in here...not because of what I did, but because of what I know.*

*I'm in here because I had to be silenced.*

*The government brought in doctors and head shrinks and said I was a danger to myself and those around me, that eating human flesh brought about a psychotic break that I would never recover from unless under medical supervision.*

*My family...my wife couldn't forgive me for forsaking her and going to that bunker, leaving her alone.*

*My children...all they know of me is that I'm a monster.*

*Do you know what happened that day, Jack? Back on day one, when all those sirens went off?*

*Exactly what I'd said happened.*

*The fertilizer plant caught on fire. The explosion that occurred...it was like a twister had dropped in the middle of our town and destroyed*

*everything in its path. Forty percent of the town was destroyed, and debris was flung almost three miles in every direction.*

*That's what we felt.*

*If I'd listened to my gut, if I had followed after my wife and went to her family's backyard bunker, I...*

*If only. Jack, I live with the what if's and it's a horrible thing to live with.*

*Listen - let me make one thing clear. I do believe in a God and in the afterlife. How could I not when I'm tiptoeing across the doorstep. But I ain't headed toward heaven, and you and I both know that.*

*I believe Hell is what we've made it to be in this current life.*

*I know exactly what's going to happen to me when I die.*

*My family...they've said their goodbyes. There's no one left, and I'm tired of pretending living another day is worth it.*

*You told me you'd help me, Jack, that when I was finally ready to end the fight, you'd help make it an easy one.*

*Will you keep your word?*

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JACK

I gagged toward the end of his confession. I don't mind telling you that.

Did I keep my word? Hell yes. I'm surprised Harold lasted as long as he did.

I did him another favor.

I went out into the hall and told everyone to say goodbye to Harold. We didn't have many patients on the ward, but those who were there, including the staff, all started shouting his name.

Harold, he died with a smile on his face.

I also kept his door open when I left.

# RYAN

PATIENT 727

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS
OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

# CHAPTER ONE

It's no secret that I love Halloween. It's probably my favorite time of the year.

I deck out my place with skulls and black crows and carve freakish pumpkins for the front yard.

Anyone who loves Halloween as much as I do, know there are rules for this season that came from the movie Trick ‘r Treat.

What are those rules?

1. Always hand out candy.

2. Always wear a costume.

3. Never blow out the candles in your pumpkin before midnight.

4. Always respect the dead.

5. Always check your candy.

6. Never take your decorations down until it's November.

7. Never hurt the innocent.

Simple right?

This next confession is all about those rules and those who broke them.

They may come from a movie, but this patient, he took them to heart and lived by them. He also ruled by them.

It didn't surprise me when he came into this place. He's a young kid, well, he came in here as a young kid and really hasn't changed. We share a common bond, and there's a camaraderie between us - which I'll share more about in the following pages.

Now - if you're not into the holiday, no biggie. Just remember that you're about to hear a confession from someone who not only

loved the season but believed it was the only holy season to be celebrated.

I'm not saying the kid was a Satanist. You can love Halloween and not follow Satan. You realize that, right?

This kid, he just respected the meaning behind the season.

# CHAPTER TWO

JACK

I got the call about an hour before my shift was about to end.

The kid is coming up.

This shocked the hell out of me because there's no reason he should be up on my floor - not yet. The kid is too young. The only reason he'd be up here is if it was self-inflicted - but he seemed fine the last I saw him, or he pissed someone off, and they decided to end him.

That's happened all too often in this place.

Knowing he was on his way, there's no way I am leaving, end of shift or not.

I meet him at the elevator and walk with him toward a free room.

"Ryan, what the hell, man?" I grab his file and look through it. Sure enough, someone went after him and sliced him good.

I pull down the thin sheet over him and see the wrapped gauze around his stomach. It's bloody, and it's going to need to be redressed.

He was gutted, and whoever did it did a good job.

I glanced over at the guard who brought him up.

"Orello." One word, a name, but that's all I needed.

That sucker will never get a deal, and I don't care what the Warden has to say about it.

"Sam. My name is Sam."

I laugh. "Fuck that shit. I'm not doing it."

The smirk on his face knew I wouldn't. At least he's in good spirits.

In all the time I've known him, he's wanted me to call him Sam. At first, I did, believing that was his name. Turns out it's not, but the kid had me thinking otherwise for a good minute.

"Even if it's my deathbed request?"

It's funny how much laughter can affect a person. Even though this kid is obviously dying - there's still a light in his eyes.

"And have hell reign down on me because I couldn't keep you alive, no thanks. Utter than name three times, and this floor will sink down into the very basement of Hell, I have no doubt."

His lips tip upward into a smile. "Don't make me laugh." His voice is a little rough for wear, and it's clear he's in pain.

I take the next few minutes to check all the lines and make sure things are hooked up correctly, then I increase the pain killer so that he's feeling nothing while we chat.

I don't need his confession. I already know his story. But we made a deal about a year ago - that if he ever pissed off the wrong person, I'd do him a solid and help send him where he wants to go more than anything.

I've never met someone who actively wanted to go to Hell.

The kid isn't a Satanist. He doesn't worship the Devil or have blood-drinking rituals or anything. He's just someone who grew up in a rough life, found solace and comfort in an idea, and embraced it in a way I've never seen anyone else do.

The kid loves Halloween. He loves everything about it. The darkness, how you can hide, wear a mask to be someone, anyone else...and I get it, I really do.

"So, pissing Orello off, huh? I thought I told you to stay clear of him?"

Ryan gives a shrug and looks off to the side.

"Please tell me it wasn't on purpose?" The kid didn't want to be here, I get that, and he'd often talked about dying, but he swore to me he'd never do it by his own hand.

"A body can only handle so much, you know that. I tried, but he wouldn't let up. All my life I've been bullied, and I just got tired of it. That's all."

That breaks my heart, I'm not going to lie.

"Out of all the ways you could die, you had to pick one of the most painful ways, didn't you? I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

He glances down at his midsection, wincing as he does so. I can't tell if he's in pain or if he's wincing as a reaction to my words.

"I thought it would be faster, to be honest. It's nothing like you see in the movies."

I snort. Kind of hard not to. "No, dumb ass, it's nothing like you see in the movies."

I grab a chair and bring it next to his bed.

"Can we discuss a deal?" Ryan gives me this hopeful look, and it just about breaks my heart.

"You know you don't need a deal. I'll do right by you, don't you worry. I don't need your confession or anything else, to be honest. We can just talk, man."

He shakes his head. "That's not how this works. A confession for a death. You told me that's how you do it."

I give him this look - it's probably more fatherly than friendly, but he gives me a little shrug.

"And what do you have to confess, Ryan? I already know what happened. Did you keep anything back? You've got a sick and twisted mind, but that's never been a secret between us."

"Who knows, maybe in the retelling, I'll remember something."

He stares at me as if trying to tell me something that words can't convey.

"Okay." If he wants to talk, then I'll let him.

# CHAPTER THREE

RYAN to JACK

You've always been good to me, man. I really appreciate that.

I never really expected to find a friend in here, you know? I mean...it's an Asylum. I'm in here with a bunch of crazies and thumb-sucking lunatics.

Some people humor me. Others avoid me. But you, it was like you sought me out, and I appreciate that.

Instead of a confession, how about we call this a story. You know it's true, at least, I hope you know it's true. All of it. No one believes that, they all think I was dropped on the head as a baby, but I swear I'm not going to lie to you.

You know I grew up in foster care, right? I think I told you that.

I never had a permanent home. I was always the freak no one knew how to handle. From what I was told, I scared most of the families, except I don't know why. Well, okay, maybe I know a little why I frightened them, but come on...I was just a kid.

Sure, the dead pets weren't the smartest thing to do, but the idea of death fascinated me.

And, okay, maybe placing curses on people and actually telling them wasn't brilliant either, but come on, they all deserved it.

I remember there was this one family...they were Christians, the kind that was in church every day it was open...the mother really didn't like me. She said I was demon-possessed and tried to get the pastor to cast all of Hell out of me...did I tell you about that?

Yeah...that didn't go over too well. The pastor said I needed to be willing, but I wasn't. Nor was I going to be. I liked who I was. I still do. I'm unique; I've always known that.

If it means there's a demon in me, who cares?

I fantasized that my parents were these uber spiritual people, connected to something bigger than all of us. That's where I got my powers - from them. Their innate, a part of my DNA, and no priest is powerful enough to take them from me.

You believe in my powers, right? I mean, you always seem to. You don't make fun of me when I talk about them, how I'm able to curse someone and see it come true, or how I can make people do things they don't want to do.

I can prove it if you want? Not that I think you do.

Orello sure believed me. I threatened him that I'd make him slice his own throat. I gave him a test, had him grab a pen off a desk and raise it to his throat.

I didn't go through with it; I just needed to prove a point - that I could if I wanted to.

That's why he did this. To make his own point.

He didn't realize that it was all part of my plan, though.

I know I promised you I would never take my own life.

Technically, I'm still keeping that promise, Jack. Right?

I'm not dying by my own hand...by my design, yes, by my will, for sure, but not my own hand...and that's what you made me promise.

# CHAPTER FOUR

RYAN

I grew up in a lot of places. Small towns. Large cities. On a farm and in a crowded apartment building.

My favorite place to call home, though, was this dinky little town a few hours from anywhere.

I was sent there after a string of foster homes kicked me out. I was sixteen, two years until I could gain my freedom, and my caseworker begged me to just finish high school, to just get through the next few years, and he promised things would be different for me.

That was probably the stupidest thing anyone has ever said to me.

But sure, I played along. Didn't say a word when I was sent to the rinky-dink town.

The people I went to live with, they actually weren't bad. That surprised me the most, I think.

They were childless and middle-aged. The woman was a teacher. The husband, a mechanic.

The best thing about them...they loved Halloween.

Other than my own parents, who died when I was young, they were the best parental figures I ever had in my life.

We'd watch horror movies all the time. They would encourage me to write my own scripts, to use the imagination that had me in trouble so many times - and I can't tell you how refreshing that was.

Sure, I had notebooks - you know that. They were used against me, but they shouldn't have been. This new foster family, they gave me those notebooks to write everything down in.

That whole plan the lawyers said I had - it was for a movie.

No one believed that, though. I mean...I guess that was my own fault. I tried to make things in that script happen in real life. I wanted to see if it was plausible, believable...

Okay, okay, that's a lie.

It was fun to do. Sure, it was all meant for a movie, but you and I both know I'd never get a movie deal. And I really wanted to see it happen.

So I made it happen.

I'm running ahead of myself, sorry.

Rashelle and Jared, they were good people. They were on me about many things, but they gave me a lot of freedom too.

Funny enough, I couldn't believe it when I found out they were huge fans of the short Seasons Greetings, where the real Sam is introduced to the world.

I know you're a fan too.

There's plenty of guys downstairs who love Trick 'r Treat too, did you know? To them, I'm something in between a hero and a weirdo. They aren't always sure how to view me, which is fine.

Or was fine. I guess I'll never see them again, so it really doesn't matter how they view me, does it?

I know you don't agree with me on this, but Sam is real. He's a demon from the beginning of time that was given form by early humans. He hasn't always been someone to fear, in fact, I don't fear him at all. Nor should you.

You know he's used me as his body multiple times, right? I still feel him, not as strong, not as powerful, but the residual is still here, in me.

Does that make me possessed? Sure. I'll take it. I'm honored Sam used me for his judgments.

Jack, you never have to worry about him. I promise you that.

Follow his rules, and you're fine.

Rashelle and Jared believed that too.

I'm sure Rashelle thought it was all a joke at first. She used to repeat the rules every so often, kind of sing-songish, and Jared would go along.

They loved decorating the season too. On my first Halloween with them, they went all out. Jared set up this elaborate display, wanting to create a fun haunted house-type look. We had skeletons sitting in rocking chairs and hanging off the edge of the gutters. Huge spiders were climbing the house, cobwebs all over the windows and shrubs...there was a sense of pride in their displays.

The town kind of went crazy for Halloween, and there were these contests about who had the best decorations, costumes, and so on.

Rashelle showcased their three glass haunted mansions awards in the china cabinet. She was so proud of them.

It wasn't just the houses that went all out. The town park looked like a huge spider's nest. The businesses all set up displays in their windows. Hanging skeletons could be found everywhere. Some were naked, others dressed up in costumes.

It had to be the best town to live in, I swear. Better than the ones that celebrate Christmas year-round.

Not everyone, though, liked the season.

Especially the churchy people. Instead of Halloween decorations, they would put out Fall Harvest crap. Like, instead of carved pumpkins, it would be plain whole pumpkins with hay bales and stalks of corn.

Talk about lame.

That Halloween night, it was one for the memories.

I was on such a high, and it wasn't because of the candy. The general spirit of the town, from Rashelle and Jared, to all the neighbors and the kids on the streets...no one waited till after dinner to hand out candy. It was an all-day thing.

School ended early, and I walked home with Rashelle. She'd

point out the houses that didn't celebrate Halloween and would joke that they'd better watch it or Sam would come after them. I'd laugh but make a mental note to see if it was true.

I mean...everyone had to hand out candy, right? Even if they didn't decorate, even if they didn't dress up, they'd at least open the door to the little kids who came by, right?

In the city, no, but here in this town...it would be different, right? Religious churches or not, no one ignores a child like that.

I was wrong.

Rashelle dressed up as a witch, Jared was a mummy, and I was the Devil. We hung around the house for hours, handing out candy, and it was fun.

Like really, really fun. I don't ever remember having that much fun with a foster family before.

Afterward, we went for a walk through town. Rashelle tried to get me to hang out with some of my classmates, but she didn't realize that I was a piranha in a pond full of sunfish. No one wanted to be my friend.

Maybe it was the goth look or the spiked hair. Hell, it could have been the black fingernails and the lip ring.

Or maybe it was because I wasn't much of a talker.

Can you blame me? Being tossed from foster home to foster home, knowing I'd never be welcomed, accepted...why would I ever make an effort.

I just had to get through these horrible years, and I'd be fine.

So no, I didn't go hang with friends as they went up to houses, had parties, and threw toilet paper everywhere. I was more than happy to walk around with Rashelle and Jared as we checked out all the spooky decorations.

While we walked, we also kept notes of whom Sam should visit, if he were truly real, and what he should do to each household.

At first, I didn't add much to the conversation. I just let the other two talk. They were pretty tame with their suggestions, if I'm being honest. Leaving smashed pumpkins on their front porch,

throwing tomato sauce all over their fences, that really wasn't Sam worthy.

Sure, it was done in fun, on their part, but something deep down inside me knew that these non-celebrating people were in the wrong, that they needed to be taught a lesson.

It bothered me when we'd walk by a completely dark house, no lights on, no lanterns out on the steps, but through cracks in the curtains, you could see people inside.

That wasn't right.

The two years with Jared and Rashelle were the best I'd ever had with a foster family. They didn't just kick me out once I was eighteen, they helped me to find a job, to get a basement apartment from a friend in the city, and made sure that I had enough food in my cupboards to get me through to my next paycheque.

I went back to visit on holidays, sharing meals with them. I wasn't family, but I was someone they called friend, and I can't tell you how much I appreciated that.

Of all my foster families, these were the only ones I truly cared about.

I went back to celebrate Halloween with them. That year, I wanted to dress up as Sam, but didn't.

It wasn't the right time.

# CHAPTER FIVE

RYAN TO JACK

If I had to give you a time and place for when Sam first started visiting me, I'd have to say it was while I lived with Jared and Rashelle.

He liked them, you know?

Sam, he's quite the friendly fellow if you stay on his good side. Piss him off, and he turns deadly.

He liked quite a few people in that tiny town. The ones that didn't follow his rules, though, they were on his bad list.

The first year that he wanted me to enact his revenge, I wouldn't. Or maybe I couldn't. I'm not sure.

But when those same people desecrated everything Sam loved so much year after year, I started listening to him more and more.

Here's the thing about possession, at least, from what I've experienced: it never happens right away. It's a gradual thing, where you have to give permission.

Sam, he spoke to me, taunted me, whispered in my ear all the time.

It was more like background noise, like having a song play over and over in your head. It wasn't until I started to sing the lyrics out loud or actually acknowledged Sam, that he had more control.

You know what I'm talking about, right?

It's not like I didn't know what I was doing. I was well aware, fully conscious, and had no issues with any of it.

He wanted me to kill. To maim. To make a point.

If it weren't for him, for his strength, there's no way I could have done what he'd wanted.

Sure, we both know people possessed - they show unique powers, don't they? Some are super strong. Some don't get hurt. Others transform.

Me, my power is the power of suggestion and making someone hurt themselves.

You know it's true.

# CHAPTER SIX

RYAN

The first person I used my power on was this grumpy retired police officer who lived in the apartment above me. I lived in a four-plex, in the bottom basement with a small window.

Dan, he didn't like anyone. Drank all day, all night, swore at anyone who crossed his path, and was just a nasty piece of work.

This one afternoon, I seemed to piss him off.

He was sitting on the front step to the only door into the building that was accessible - he'd parked his car tight up against the other door and wouldn't move it.

He got up and stood there, blocking the door. Every time I'd move around him, he'd step to the side, blocking me.

Sam was screaming in my head.

We had a history with this man, and Sam did not like him, not one bit.

My first Halloween there, before I'd headed to spend it with Jared and Rashelle, I'd put out some carved pumpkins on the front steps. Dan, he stepped on them, crushing them beneath his boots.

He did every time I replaced those pumpkins - a total of three times -before I gave up.

So, when he started to play this dodge and weave game, Sam had enough.

I can still hear what he was screaming.

"Let me show you what I can do. LET ME SHOW YOU."

I finally said ok.

It was like I was high, an instant feeling of not being in control, of floating in saltwater, buoyant and relaxed. So relaxed.

Jack, it really was an experience. Something I'd give anything to feel again, just one more time.

I stood there, my feet planted tight against that cement. Dan started to weave, back and forth, back and forth, spit coming out of his mouth as he taunted me - saying, "What are you going to do, asshole? Huh? What are you going to do?"

I remember shrugging, like I didn't have a care in the world, and I said one word back: "Nothing."

He laughed. Almost like a maniac, until he started choking on his spit.

That's when Sam spoke through me.

"You're going to do it all yourself, asshole."

That was the first time I heard his voice. It was childlike with a hint of danger and so unlike my own.

I watched as Dan's hand wrapped around his own throat, one hand over the top of the other, his fingers squeezing tight.

He was cutting off his own air supply, while I just stood there.

I didn't try to stop him. I didn't try to help him. Hell, I didn't do anything at all, other than just stand there and watch as he struggled to breathe.

"See?" Sam was whispering to me. "See what we can do!"

I saw. I saw, and it didn't scare me, not one bit.

No, he didn't die. But, he was scared.

Oh...he was scared all right.

One second he was about to lose consciousness, and the next, his hands fell to his side, and he was falling backward, landing on his ass as he gasped for breath.

I just walked past him, into the building, and down to my apartment.

After that, whenever I'd see Dan, he'd sneer but never outright confront me.

I saw the power I could have with Sam, and I liked it. I liked it

a lot.

That wasn't the only time something like that happened, but it was the first.

When Sam whispers, I listen.

From that moment onward, I never said no, never said it was too much or too dark or too deadly.

I was fully aware of everything that happened.

I was conscious, present, in the moment...those that tell you otherwise, they're full of shit.

You know that, right?

Every fucker downstairs who claims they had no idea what they were doing because they were possessed are all liars.

Okay, okay, I'll calm down.

Fuck, this hurts, Jack. Can you...yes, thanks.

How long till it starts working? I don't want to feel this anymore, I...

Ahhh. Thanks, man.

I don't got long, do I?

I haven't even gotten to the best part. Mind if I fast forward a bit, to why I'm here?

You love Halloween decorations, right? I'm sure you go all out, don't you? With the pumpkins and crows and skeletons, am I right?

Sam wanted to decorate the town that Jared and Rashelle lived.

He wanted to decorate it with the bodies of those who ignored him.

Personally, I thought it was a good idea.

I told Jared and Rashelle that I had to work that year and that I wouldn't make it out. It almost gutted me to do that, to lie to them. Rashelle was really disappointed and made me promise to come for Thanksgiving at least.

I promised her I'd be there.

I drove by their house, proud of how it was all decked out. They'd win their award again, no doubt.

I waited until they'd for work and then sneaked into the house.

Months ago, when I'd come for a visit, I bought a bunch of supplies with me and hid everything in the basement in a few of my boxes. I knew they'd never look in them; they'd once promised to respect my privacy.

I'd bought the best costume too, that year. I was dressed up as Sam himself, pumpkin head and all, so no one would ever recognize me.

The first person Sam wanted to visit was Mr. Eldridge from across the road.

That old bag of bones was a miserable man, never handing out candy, never decorating his front porch, grumbling all the time about why should he be expected to waste his hard-earned money on candy for brats?

I asked Sam what we were going to do. He reminded me we weren't going to do anything, he was going to do all the suggesting while Mr. Eldridge was going to do the deed.

I was fascinated by what he meant. I mean, we had a knife, rope, tape, and gloves.

The gloves were for me. Before I touched anything, I had to put them on.

I also had to make sure I kept the costume on at all times.

Sam even reminded me to use gloves when I first bought the outfit and when I put it on. Seemed like overkill to me, but I listened.

When Sam whispered, I listened.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

JACK

That's where this confession stops.

The kid let out a long sigh and then didn't have the energy to say more.

That might have been because I added a little extra morphine to his IV. He was in a lot of pain, and he was dying.

He didn't need to die in agony.

There's a lot he didn't get into.

First - he's not really a kid. At the time of his death, he was thirty-three years of age.

He'd been in here for a good ten-plus years.

I call him a kid because he acts like one. Like a pubescent fifteen-year-old.

In my mind, he'll always be a kid.

He had his moments of lucid adulthood, like today, but if he weren't in this hellhole, he'd be the type to live in a basement apartment playing video games all night while working at a grease joint during the day.

He'd never be the type to grow up; thus, he'll always be a kid to me.

A kid that had more than three deaths attributed to him.

Once the cops started putting together his involvement, they realized the deaths of those who lived close to him in the city were also by his hand.

Yes, by his hand.

I don't believe he managed to get people to kill themselves. He did it himself, with his own hands.

The police and the judge believed the same too.

Those foster parents of his, they stuck by him as long as they could until there came the point when they had to turn away.

Surprisingly, Ryan never held that against them. In all the times we've talked, he's only ever spoken highly of the couple.

I wonder if they'd want to be notified of his passing?

The kid, he died in his sleep. I made sure of that.

# MORE CONFESSION BOOKS?

Hell yes.

I've got notepads full of confessions.

If you head over to my website, you'll see all the books. Each confession book is centered around a theme, so we have ones that remind me of the original bloody fairytales, families who kill together, murder for marriage, and even ones around the holidays.

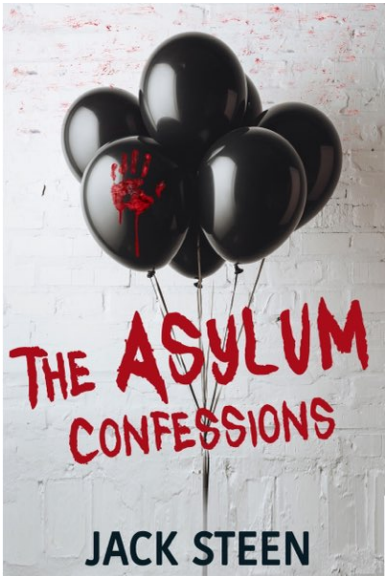
You can grab them in print, audio and ebooks. Buy direct off my website and get them cheaper than at retailers.

If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com (and get a free confession to boot).

Or, if you want to become an Asylum Addict, join my VIP ADDICTS SUBSCRIPTION GROUP, where you'll get to read whatever I write for free and before anyone else and even get some free stuff. https://reamstories.com/jacksteen

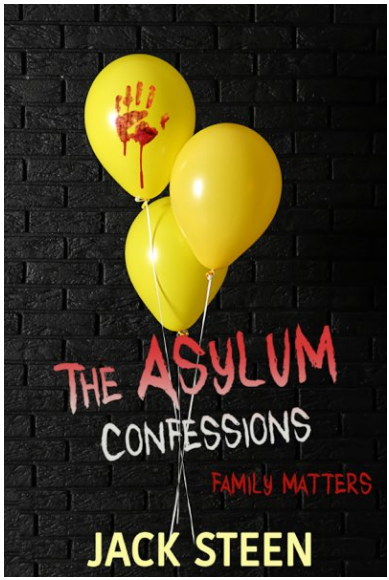
# CONFESSION BOOK: THE ORIGINAL KILLERS




The Asylum Confessions

The one that started it all! These are a few of my favorite confessions - if you haven't already read them, I hope you enjoy the journey!

# CONFESSION BOOK: FAMILY OF KILLERS

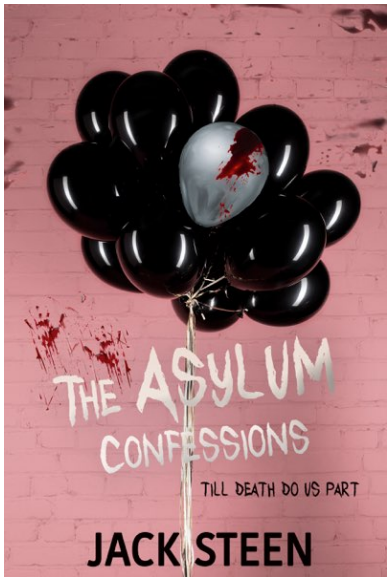



The Asylum Confessions: Family of Killers

More confessions that deal with all things family related.

- One is a father who just wanted to protect his little girl.
- Then there’s a pig farmer who never should have had children.
- One wants you to believe he's the brother of a mob boss.
- And then there’s one would argue she should receive the Mother of the Year award.

# CONFESSION BOOK: MURDER FOR MARRIAGE

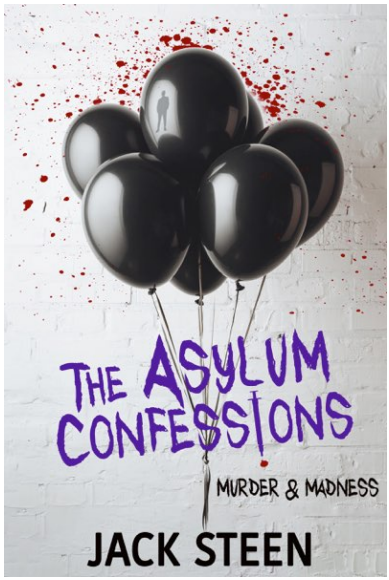



The Asylum Confessions: Murder for Marriage

The couples that kill together…well, they for sure don't stay together, right? These confessions deal with couples…

- One is a Preacher with a past.
- Another shouldn't be trusted.
- What's with farmers with buried secrets?
- And another who has a thing for soil and gardens.

# CONFESSION BOOK: MURDER AND MADNESS

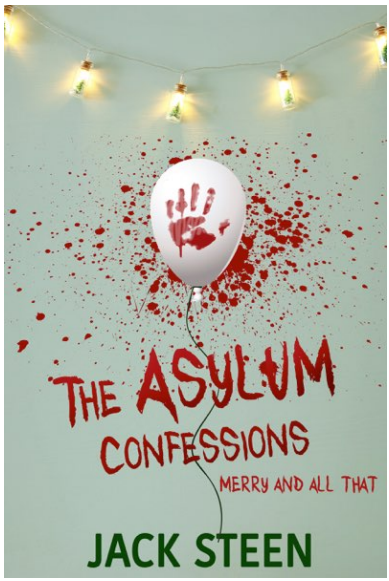



The Asylum Confessions: Murder and Madness

This book has confessions that remind me of the original Grimm brothers tales - you know, the good ones.

- Think Modern Day Sleeping Beauty – with a twist.
- One with a resemblance to Rapunzel that is kind of scary.
- One reminds me of Cinderella…with a thing for shoes.

# CONFESSION BOOK: MERRY WITH ALL THAT MURDER




The Asylum Confessions: Happy Merry and All That

Christmas isn't always a merry thing for people. These confessions focus on the holiday theme and patients who:

- Likes to nibble on sugar cookies while watching his victim die
- Another likes to replace the jam in the thumbprint cookies with blood
- One patient has a thing about gingerbread cookies and revenge
- And then there's one - give her some candy cane shortbread cookies - after all she's been through, she deserves them.